UNEXPECTED STORIES

OCTAVIA E. BUTLER

TWO NEVER-BEFORE-PUBLISHED STORIES BY THE AUTHOR OF
KINDRED AND *PARABLE OF THE SOWER*

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Octavia E. Butler

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Foreword

In a poem I once heard, a lonely young man walking past a desolate alley sees someone, a street denizen, a woman moving in the shadows. She looks familiar and he realizes that this is his mother—dead now for many years.

Reading posthumously published work of an author you loved is like this—shocking, strange, and very sad. And if that work was early on in the author's career, it's like seeing your mother as a woman younger and more hopeful than you, than I.

Discovering these lost stories of Octavia Butler is a kind of poetry and revivification: poetry and revivification, the hallmarks of our lost sister. Reading these tales is like looking at a photograph of a child whom you only knew as an adult. In her eyes you can see the woman that you came to know much later—a face, not yet fully formed, that contains the promise of something that is now a part of you: the welcomed surprise of recognition in innocent eyes.

In these stories we find two women faced with war or with peace. Carrying on their backs society's future or its end. Both women come to us deeply embedded into histories, beliefs, and landscapes that share ghostly traits of our own, stretched and blasted and made strange. We are asked: Imagine a society striated by colors, imbued with a belief about power that isolates and cripples the one who is paradoxically the most important being. Or a teacher, a leader, on the run from the government that now hunts the telepaths it once cultivated as part of a utopian propaganda.

Long before Octavia Butler changed the face of science and speculative fiction, the landscape of the potentials of literature, she was imagining these worlds. She was asking her readers to enter with her into these untried territories with the challenges, the tragedies, the imperatives of being alive and of becoming more. The stories are disturbing. The characters stay on after the reading is finished. Once entered, the premises that made each story its own reality

become familiar and this new society no longer seems strange or distant. We find, instead, that our worldview is transformed by an imagination that sees no border between thought and what is *real*.

Unexpected Stories reveals the themes that would become Butler's lexicon: the complicating mysteries we assign to power, race, and gender. Octavia Butler wrote these two stories, "A Necessary Being" and "Childfinder," early on in her journey from reader to writer, from fiction to unassailable reality. She is working out in these two very different stories the purpose she would refine with every book, every series, every word she subsequently wrote.

Walter Mosley

A Necessary Being

The Rohkohn Hao, Tahneh, was sharing her evening meal with her chief judge and discussing the current drought when she first learned of the foreigners who had entered her territory. There were three of them, not traveling north or south over the long strip of coastal desert as she would have expected, but coming from the east through the foothills. Apparently, they were following the narrow dwindling river that had in better times kept Tahneh's people well supplied with water. The hunter who brought the message described the foreigners as a huntress, a judge, and, startlingly, a young Hao. Tahneh looked sharply at the hunter when he said it.

"You're certain that it was a Hao and not just a high judge?"

"So the message said, Rohkohn Hao." And the man quoted. "'The foreign Hao is male and very young. Perhaps even too young to have been acknowledged by his people. His coloring is unmistakably pure blue and he is much taller and larger than the judge who is with him.'"

Tahneh heard this silently, her face turned away from the hunter. She felt just the beginnings of dread as she began to believe the report. A stupid child-Hao out almost alone on land that belonged to her people! What could his own people have been thinking of to let him wander around so unguarded?

"How far is he from here?" she asked the hunter.

"Two days, perhaps two and a half, Rohkohn Hao. He's traveling slowly. He had just emerged from the mountains when a group of our hunters saw him and sent word back to us. Since he is coming toward us, our fighters could reach him from here in only a day."

"Is there any possibility that he saw our hunters—saw them signaling us perhaps?" Tahneh had trouble keeping the hope out of her voice. Even a young Hao would have the sense to take his friends and run if he realized that there

were other Kohn in the area. He would not know whether Tahneh's Rohkohn were hostile or friendly and he would not be foolish enough to wait and find out. If only he had seen her hunters' light signals.

"He could not have seen them, Rohkohn Hao," the hunter assured her. "Our hunters made certain that both he and his friends were asleep when they sent their message." The hunter seemed proud that members of his caste had acted so carefully, so correctly. He added, "Our hunters also ask that we hold our answer until we receive another signal from them—so that we don't accidently alert the Hao and his party."

Thorough hunters, Tahneh thought bitterly. A tribute to her insistence on training and discipline. Her body whitened and became slightly luminescent. This was a sign of the approval that she should have felt, but did not feel, a sign to the hunter that he and his fellow hunters had done well.

"Is there anything more?" she asked.

"No, Rohkohn Hao."

Tahneh let the light go out of her coloring, let her normal blue return and the hunter, understanding that he had been dismissed, turned and left her apartment.

She sat still, ignoring the silent chief judge who sat beside her and staring into the fire of her large fireplace. This particular judge was a friend as well as the top official of her government. She had had liaisons with him before his marriage and after the death of his wife; he was a good companion. But she wished beyond expressing that she had not invited him to eat with her this particular night. In another moment he would speak and say the things she did not want to hear.

After a moment the chief judge's normal blue-green coloring soared to brilliant white luminescence with his joy. "At last, Tahneh, at last!" The words came out in a harsh whisper. "We must send more fighters—judges—to capture him before those hunters frighten him away!"

Tahneh watched him silently, knowing that his elation would soon be shared by the rest of her people. Another Hao at last. A young one to be the successor that her body had been unable to produce, a child who could probably be

captured without the danger and loss of life that would be involved in capturing an experienced adult.

"With his youth," the chief judge said, "it might even be possible to persuade him to accept the Rohkohn as his people without the usual … coercion."

"Perhaps," said Tahneh. She knew that this was a vain hope, that there was no possibility of "persuading" a Hao to betray his people other than by the brutal traditional methods. But she knew too that the words had been meant as a kindness. This judge, more than any other, understood how deeply she hated the traditional ways.

She longed to see the young Hao. She had not seen one of her own kind since the death of her father twenty years before. She had felt her loneliness agonizingly right after his death, but she had been very young herself then—just acknowledged by her people. Her loneliness had passed, or she thought it had. She was surprised at the new loneliness, the desperate need she felt now—need that she knew was in conflict with her fear for the boy, with her hope that he had already fled.

But no matter what she hoped, she had to assume that he had not escaped. For the sake of her people, she had to plan his capture.

She spoke to her chief judge. "We will obey the conventions in this, Ehreh. The Hao and his party are to be brought here unharmed, untouched if possible. They are to be treated as potential friends, not as prisoners. They're to be convinced that we're only being cautious with them. If we can make them understand that, then they'll be careful not to do anything that might make us turn hostile."

"We can't be too gentle with them," Ehreh said. "We can't take the chance of their escaping."

"Take a large enough force with you to prevent their escape. Take as many fighters, both judges and hunters, as you think you'll need. But remember, the point is to give them no reason to risk trying to escape."

Ehreh stared at her. "You want me to go after them, Tahneh?"

"Would you rather I send someone else—someone with less knowledge of the Hao, someone who'll lose this boy?"

He considered this, then gave the slight flash of white

that indicated agreement. “For that matter,” he said slowly, “you should go yourself.”

“You won’t need me if you do as I’ve ordered!” The words came out more sharply than she had intended and she knew that Ehreh would notice.

He looked at her silently for several seconds. “You’ve been alone for a long time, Tahneh. You should welcome this chance to capture another Hao.”

“The people need him, not me,” she said shortly. “They’ll have him.”

“They will if I can catch him without your help.”

“A moment ago you didn’t even think you were needed to make the capture.”

“A moment ago I hadn’t thought at all. I’m thinking now, though. A Hao … We’ll need you, Tahneh. If he decides to leave his friends, escape alone, we may lose him no matter how many fighters I have.”

“He won’t do that if you don’t give him reason. We Hao don’t particularly like abandoning our friends even when it’s necessary.”

Ehreh laid a hand on her shoulder and she felt the pressure of it heavily. “‘We,’ Tahneh? Already, ‘we’? You must have been more lonely than I thought.”

She said nothing.

“By refusing to go after this boy, you are giving him a chance to escape.”

“I’m giving you a chance to prove that you deserve your high position!” The words stung him as she had intended them to. She saw yellow flicker in his coloring and was pleased. It was better to have him angry and defensive than to have him beginning to doubt that she was acting in the best interests of the people.

“I am not Hao,” he said quietly. “I cannot perform Hao duties.”

“Nor will you define Hao duties.”

His yellow flickering stopped, and to her surprise his coloring faded toward gray. Gray was for the most private and deeply felt grief. “This is an ordeal that both you and the boy must bear, Tahneh.” Ehreh spoke very softly. “We are close, you and I, and I can see the pain that you think your harsh words hide. I understand your sentiment, but the

people can't afford it."

Tahneh let some of her own gray come through bleakly. "All right, Ehreh, we'll stop snarling at each other. It's meaningless anyway; I've already made my decision. Gather your judges and hunters and go capture the young Hao."

"You *must* come with us!"

Her blue returned at that—returned harshly metallic, a cold threatening color. She said nothing to Ehreh. She only looked at him. He understood that he had gone too far. He rose silently and left her.

When he was gone, she sat still for a long moment, then bent over slowly, very slowly, until her head touched her knees. She rocked back and forth, still moving with agonizing slowness, and her body became a deep gray. Once she spoke the name of her father loudly, sharply as though she were asking a question. But the dead were dead; death was an end. She neither expected nor received guidance. But she did call to mind the memory of her father, sitting on his mat, lying on his pallet, sitting in the litter that the people had used to carry him. She had never seen him standing. He had been old when she was born, and his legs had been useless for two-thirds of his life. The Rohkohn had had to follow the tradition when they captured him. He had refused to renounce his former people—the people from whom the Rohkohn had stolen him—as a Hao was duty bound to refuse, and the Rohkohn had had to cripple him to prevent his ever returning to them. They had burned him with hot irons behind his knees until his lower legs were permanently useless. He had been bitterly vengeful at first, and his agony until his burns healed had helped him make the lives of those who had chosen to serve him hard.

Finally though, as both his physical pain and his emotional anguish receded, as he saw that those he abused and tormented never struck back, he had begun to make the adjustment that some captive Hao never made. He had admitted to himself that the Rohkohn had not acted out of cruelty but out of severe need. They had been without a Hao and that had made them desperate. A Kohn tribe without a Hao was a tribe in the process of dying. Even a captive Hao who might remain forever hostile was a symbol

around which the people could gather, and thus was better than no Hao at all. Without a Hao, people had no purpose, no direction, no unity. It was remarkable that the Rohkohn had even been able to work together across the lines of caste to capture him. He had finally accepted their need as sufficient excuse for what they had done to him and he had ceased to fight them. He had accepted liaisons with women of their judge caste, and one of these women had borne him a Hao daughter, Tahneh. He had given advice that had proven good and valuable to the council of judges. Finally, the people, seeing that he had accepted them, acknowledged him as their leader instead of merely a symbol of their unity. He had given them years of good government. He had been a better leader than any tribe had a right to expect of a captive Hao. Only Tahneh's memory of his legs marred her picture of him. She remembered the way he had propelled himself with short hand-held sticks in the wheeled cart that he had had his artisans build. Sometimes, however, within the privacy of his apartment, the cart had been too awkward and he, not wanting to ask for help, had dragged himself on his hands and knees, unwittingly embittering his young daughter, turning her against the tradition that had so disabled him. Even now, it was painful for Tahneh to remember him crawling.

The Tehkohn Hao, Diut, and his party had followed a narrow river down from the mountains, detouring only when sheer drops made it necessary. They watched the land beyond the river grow dryer and more barren as they descended, while the river itself grew narrower. Vegetation, except in the vicinity of the river, became tough and spiny and Diut had to show Jeh and Cheah the ancient map he carried so that they would be certain they were still on the old trade route—still on a trail that would support life. Once they saw, however, that the trail was outlined in green, a pro-life color, they did not complain about the poor hunting or the increasing heat. They did begin traveling at night, though, at Jeh's suggestion, and their hunting improved.

By the time they reached the foothills, Diut knew that he was close to the ancient ruins that had been his excuse for traveling so far from his mountain home, his people, and

his new Hao responsibilities. He knew too that in spite of the map he carried he could pass by the ruins without seeing them if he was not careful. Even when the desert dwelling was new it must have been well camouflaged. By now, unless it had begun to cave in, it would probably be almost indistinguishable from the various hills and mounds that were normal to this area.

It was because Diut was watching so carefully for the ruins that he spotted his captors before Jeh and Cheah saw them. He was alarmed but he gave no sign to his friends until he had looked around very carefully and seen that the three of them had walked into a wide, remarkably well camouflaged circle of fighters—a circle that was now beginning to move with them.

Diut's immediate reaction was humiliation. *He* had been quietly, efficiently captured by a group of hunters and judges. He could see them as though they were uncamouflaged now that he had been alerted to their presence. But he should have seen them before he walked into their midst. He should have seen them before he led Jeh and Cheah into their midst.

He looked at Jeh, saw that the young judge was just discovering his captivity. Jeh's coloring had not changed. He did not look around wildly to give notice to his captors that he had become aware of them. But in his eyes, in his movements now there was an animal wariness that had not been there before, and Diut knew that he was looking for a break, a flaw in the circle—an escape route.

The wariness was even more pronounced in Cheah. She was a high huntress, and using her speed and camouflage to escape predators too powerful to kill was second nature to her. Diut spoke to them both very softly, knowing that he might not only be overheard by his captors, but also understood by them. The Tehkohn dialect was very close to the ancient imperial language that all Kohn tribes knew. Diut had seen for himself that strangers picked up his language very easily.

"Jeh," he whispered. "Cheah! Be still. Don't resist."

The two relaxed cautiously, then glanced at him, perhaps wondering how sure he could be of himself in a situation that he had faced before only in training. Diut

thought he saw doubt in their eyes and he turned his own gaze bitterly forward. Jeh and Cheah were young, but still they were several years older than he was; they had had more experience. But he was Hao. His eyes and ears were sharper than theirs. He could see that there was no flaw in this circle. More, he could see that this circle contained twice as many people as it should have needed to make it secure, and that those people were a well-disciplined force. The foreign fighters had spaced themselves evenly and now moved together in spite of their numbers.

They did not get in each other's way as they would have, had they been less well trained. They left no holes big enough for an alert hunter or judge to go through. There was no way out for Jeh and Cheah. But Diut saw that he alone, using the greater strength and speed that was part of his Hao heritage—and perhaps breaking a neck or two—might be able to get free.

He thought about it. Would his escape provide enough of a diversion to give Jeh and Cheah their opening? It would if their captors were too startled to move in at once and kill them. But that seemed unlikely.

The fighters of the circle were moving along easily with Diut's party now, subtly guiding it but never closing in or being obvious. This was a form of courtesy extended to captives whose status had not yet been decided—captives who had not yet been judged dangerous. Perhaps the desert people considered Diut's party too small to be actively hostile. But if Diut broke through their circle, killed one or two of their fighters, they would change their minds quickly. And they would do their best to make Jeh and Cheah pay for the deaths Diut had caused. They looked far too efficient to lose all three of their captives. Diut decided to wait. The desert people were obeying the conventions meticulously, when with their superior numbers they certainly did not have to. He would suspend judgment on them as they apparently had on him.

He kept his party moving as slowly as it had before he became aware of his captors. The desert people did not hurry him, did not prod him at all as long as he continued to follow the river. If he strayed, however—and he did, testing—the fighters toward whom he strayed ceased to

move, became more visible, quietly threatening. He allowed himself to be intimidated and spent the rest of the long night going where they wanted him to go.

He had ceased to think about the ruins that he had come so far to see. He was not watching for them at all but he was not surprised when early during the second night of his captivity, he found himself approaching them. He had already decided that his captors must he heading toward them, that their people must have moved into the desert ruin as, generations before, Diut's people had moved into an ancient mountain ruin.

The desert people had made their city's main entrances too visible, Diut thought as he looked down the hillside at them. The ruin itself began on the hillside—or rather, within the hill—just above where the river cut through the last of the hills to flow across flatter lands toward the sea. It seemed to Diut that the desert tribe had cut away too much of the vegetation over and around their dwelling and planted their crops too openly at the base of the hill in the wide spread of soil that the river had deposited. But perhaps desert customs were different. Perhaps this vast treeless land made the kind of camouflage that Diut was used to too difficult. Or perhaps these desert people had simply not had a war, as Diut's people had, to make them cautious.

As Diut and his party started down the hill, their escort became visible. Other people were also visible around the ill-concealed entrances. Several nonfighters—farmers and artisans—stood in scattered bunches watching Diut in particular. The nonfighters were shy quiet green or yellow-green people who would not have been out if they had expected trouble. Diut noted, though, that there were no children visible. The desert people were not that certain of his party's docility then.

Diut brought to mind the model of this dwelling that existed in vast detail back at his mountain home. Long ago, a highly skilled imperial artisan had been traded from his home in the desert city to the mountain city that Diut's people now occupied. Nonfighters had been more harshly treated in those days, and fighters commonly regarded them as property—trade goods. But this artisan had apparently loved his city too much to face the prospect of never seeing

it again. Thus he had built a model of it, the desert city in miniature. It filled an entire room and was nothing to be carried about, but Diut had used it to memorize the floor plan of the desert dwelling. Now he used that memory to decide which of the entrances to approach.

No one stopped him or spoke to him. He was pleased to see that some of the desert people did look surprised, however. His body glowed luminescent blue. Let them wonder how he knew which public entrance led most directly to the apartment of their Hao—or of their chief judge if they were unlucky enough to be without a Hao.

Diut stopped in front of that entrance, feeling tense with anticipation in spite of himself. He had not seen another of his own kind since war took the lives of his mother and his uncle. And the training, the discipline that these people had shown bespoke the presence of a Hao.

Finally, the desert Hao came out. She was a woman of middle years, her coloring still deep blue, not yet touched with the flecks of yellow that foretold advanced age. Her body was straight and lean and she was the first person Diut had seen since he had attained his full growth who could match him in height. Her coloring attracted him, held his attention as though he had never seen another Hao. He realized that he had, on seeing her, automatically dimmed his own brilliance and let his coloring return to normal. To continue his blinding luminescence now that she was present seemed challenging somehow. And Diut could think of nothing he wanted from this desert town to warrant his challenging an older, more experienced Hao.

He and the woman gazed at each other for a long moment without speaking, each appraising the other. Was she as hungry for the sight of another of her kind as he had been, Diut wondered. She spoke finally.

“You’re welcome here, cousin—you and those with you. I am Tahneh.” She looked past him at her people, who had gathered around at a respectful distance. “We are Rohkohn.”

Thus, for the first time, Diut learned the name of his host-captors. Tahneh had a dry, somehow ironic voice that made Diut wonder if she found him and his party amusing. There was no white in her coloring, but still he felt that her

manner was slightly mocking. She spoke in the old imperial language—the language of conversing with strangers and of writing. And in the old language, she had the right to call him cousin since according to tradition, all Hao were related. They could come "out of the air," born inexplicably to families of judges, or they could descend from long lines of their own kind. But the blue related them regardless. It deified them and made them members of the Hao family—the highest and best fighters that the people could produce. Diut answered in his own flawless imperial.

"I am Diut. My companions are Jeh and Cheah." He gestured toward each one of them in turn. "We are Tehkohn."

The woman glanced toward the distant wall of mountains. "Tehkohn—Mountain People." She translated the word into her own tribe's dialect with a change of stress that made it almost unrecognizable. Then in the old language again, "You're a long way from home, Tehkohn Hao."

Diut found himself impressed with her use of his title. Since his acknowledgement, his own people had begun addressing him by title instead of by name, of course, but somehow it meant more coming from another Hao. He answered Tahneh's implied question without resentment.

"We trace the ways of our ancestors. Our map told us there were ruins here. We didn't know that the Rohkohn had occupied them." As he spoke the woman watched him in a way that made him glad he had no reason to lie to her.

"You have one of the old maps with you, then?" she asked.

He reached back to the pouch strapped across his shoulders, found the map by touch, and handed it to her. She unrolled it and looked at it, felt the smooth, tough clear coating that covered the fine paper and made it flexible but nearly indestructible. The art of making such permanent records had been lost to most of the Kohn tribes since the splintering of the empire because the main ingredient for the coating came from trees far down the wild eastern slopes of the mountains. The map seemed to impress Tahneh.

She handed it back and, with a slight now proper

whitening of her coloring to emphasize the positive spirit in which she spoke, she said, “Eat with us, Tehkohn Hao, and rest. When you’re ready, I’ll show you the ruins myself. We Rohkohn occupy only a small part of them.”

Tahneh saw to it that the young mountain Hao was treated as an honored guest. She had a special meal prepared for him—a meal that would permit him to sample the fish and bird delicacies of the coast but that would also let him return, if he chose, to the more familiar meats that her hunters brought back from the game traps of the foothills. She kept the affair small, however, inviting only the chiefs of each of her four castes and their mates. The drought had not left enough food for real feasting. She had the meal served in the main chamber of her own apartment, and before it was served, she found time to speak privately with Ehreh.

“I want no special watch kept on Diut,” she told him. “Do nothing to frighten him or make him suspicious and we’ll have no trouble with him.”

“I’ll see that no one bothers him,” Ehreh promised. “He’ll be safe as long as he’s with you anyway.”

Tahneh looked at him sharply. He was too quick. Another time, his speed in understanding her would have been amusing—another time, but not now.

His eyes seemed to hold no expression at all as he spoke again. “Later, Tahneh, when you give him to us, he’ll see you as his betrayer.”

“So?” His words angered her and her tone was bitter. “And to avoid that, you would rather I give him to you now.”

“I would. But I know you won’t. In your place, I probably wouldn’t either.” Ehreh sighed. “He would hate you anyway because you symbolize us. But he’s young. Perhaps he’ll get over his hatred.”

Tahneh looked past him at a dimly glowing patch of wall. She could speak more freely to Ehreh than she could to others. She could talk to him—as much as she could talk to anyone. “I surprised myself,” she said softly. “I looked at Diut and I decided that I had been alone long enough. That I would have him, tonight, while he was still whole and

free. I gave no consideration at all to what he might feel later. I didn't care."

"And now you do care," said Ehreh. "But not enough to stop."

She refocused her eyes to look at him. "No. Not enough to stop. I tell myself that I'm giving him a few more hours of … freedom."

"You are."

She flashed yellow denial, disgust.

He laid a hand on her shoulder with the familiarity of a close friend. "You yourself feel that you're betraying him. I didn't realize that. You're not, of course."

She said nothing.

"This is the succession, Tahneh!" His voice became hard. "You have responsibilities, but for once you have no rights. You're duty bound to help us, or at least not to interfere with us. You didn't catch him for us, and you can't release him. So how can you be his betrayer?"

She took his hand from her shoulder, held it for a moment, then let it go. "Not all feelings are reasonable, Ehreh. It doesn't matter."

"It will matter. If you go to him feeling as you do now, you'll have the bones of a liaison. He's Hao, and yet your guilt could cause you to find less with him than you could with some hunter." Ehreh's blue-green body glowed with the intensity of his feeling. "Make yourself two people, Tahneh; you know how. You need not to be tonight the person that you must become tomorrow."

Later, as she ate, surrounded by the best of her fighter and nonfighter castes with Diut beside her, she struggled to follow Ehreh's advice. She knew he was right. And it would not be the first time that she had had to split herself in two. She was no stranger to unpleasant duties. It was just that none of them had ever touched her so deeply before. None of them had ever concerned another Hao.

The two companions of the Tehkohn Hao provided her with an unexpected diversion when they mentioned that they were married.

Intercaste marriages were so rare among the Rohkohn that Tahneh would have had to go to the tribal records to find out when the last one had taken place. She looked at

the huntress and the judge with more interest now and saw by their coloring that both were high in their respective castes. Jeh was a deep quiet blue-green no more than a shade or two yellower than Ehreh. It was possible that if the young judge lived up to the promise of his coloring he could become a chief himself someday. And Cheah, his wife. Although she was unusually small for a huntress, she was almost exactly the same dark green as Tahneh's chief hunter. It was possible that Diut had plans for them both … Tahneh refused to think further in that direction. She questioned Cheah curiously.

"Didn't you have trouble in your liaison? Weren't there challengers?" People who joined in intercaste liaisons were nearly always challenged by members of their own caste—members who chose to be insulted that one of their own had turned away from them.

Cheah whitened, remembering. "I had three challengers, Rohkohn Hao. Only three." The number was unusually small, probably due to Cheah's high coloring. The little huntress was boasting. It was not necessary for her to say what had happened to her challengers. She was still alive; therefore they must be dead. She looked at her husband.

"I had five challengers," said Jeh. He showed no white in his coloring but in his eyes there was a look of cold satisfaction.

"You would have had more here," Ehreh said quietly from his place at Tahneh's left. Ehreh's prejudice against hunters and against hunter-judge intermarriage was at least one of the reasons why there had been no such intermarriage in recent Rohkohn history.

Jeh let his dark eyes travel over the chief judge silently, almost insolently, measuring. "I think not," he said softly. "I would have had more at home, but I made certain that many people saw each of the five. By the end of the fifth, all disapproval had vanished." His coloring had brightened with his intensity, and his tone had been one of confident challenge.

Tahneh was surprised at how easily the situation amused her. "Peace, young one," she said quickly. They were still savage young animals, these two. But then, that

was why they were still alive. “Your people accept your union now?”

“Some said first that we were a bad example to the children,” said Cheah. “But by the time our son was born to make our liaison a marriage, most had accepted us.”

Tahneh turned to look at Diut, who had ignored the conversation around him and concentrated silently on his food. “Tehkohn Hao, what did you think of your friends’ marriage?”

“I was too young for my thoughts on the subject to matter,” he said. He shifted uncomfortably. “I hadn’t yet been acknowledged.”

He was acknowledged now, then. That answered one question no one had gotten around to asking him. He continued eating as though he expected his answer to satisfy her.

“What the Hao thinks is always important,” she said. “I don’t believe they would have dared anything as lengthy as a marriage if you had objected to it.”

“No … I didn’t object, Rohkohn Hao.” He did not look at her.

He seemed ill-at-ease, she thought. As though the gathering that she had arranged to honor him had only made him nervous. But no, that wasn’t likely. He would be used to dealing with people of high rank. It wasn’t the presence of her chiefs that was bothering him. It was her own presence.

Deliberately, Tahneh continued to look at him as though she expected him to say more, as though she might even disapprove of his liberal attitude.

He became defensive. “There was no reason for them not to marry. Not after they had defeated their challengers.”

“So,” Tahneh said noncommittally. She looked away from him and took a bite of fish. She could almost feel his relief. He could not have been around Hao before, she decided. Of course, neither had she for some time, but she had at least had her father to guide her while she was growing up. Diut acted as though he had had no Hao example at all to follow. Also, there was the matter of his youth. Tahneh could remember what it was like to be a newly acknowledged uncertain young Hao, afraid of a

misstep, afraid of shaming oneself, afraid even of the Hao responsibilities. It occurred to her that such fears might have been the reason for his leaving home.

Others had begun carrying on their own quiet conversations when she spoke to him again.

"You were acknowledged just before you left home, Tehkohn Hao?"

He glanced at her. "Yes," he said quietly.

Tahneh whitened in spite of herself. "And when you insisted on traveling away from home, your council of judges and your chiefs became angry enough to take back their acknowledgement if they could have."

Diut's coloring became faintly blue-green as it took on a small amount of yellow. Then he caught himself, restored his normal blue, and looked at her angrily.

She realized that he had misread her. He thought she was trying to humiliate him. She deliberately kept amusement in her voice and coloring as she continued.

"After my acknowledgement, I explored the ruins here myself. I found a place where one of our passageways connected with a network of natural caverns, and I followed the caverns through the northern hills until I emerged on a cliff overlooking the sea. I was gone for days. My people were frantic."

The memory was surprisingly pleasant. She had all but forgotten it—her own assertion of independence. She glanced at him and found him watching her. He turned away, a little too quickly, and picked up a piece of fruit. But at least he had lost his anger.

He was far too sensitive, she thought. But Hao, especially Hao raised by judges, were never treated as roughly as they should be. They were too valuable, and as they grew past puberty, too dangerous.

She continued to watch him, enjoying beauty that he probably did not realize he possessed. That was another attribute of the Hao, although Tahneh did not see that she herself possessed it to any unusual degree. He was well-muscled and deep-chested in the way of mountain people. His eyes were mountain-narrow and his face was angular and lean with none of the roundness of her own. This would have made him seem older, grimmer, had he not been so

obviously unable to cope with another Hao on equal terms. His age made no difference now though. Only his blue was important. The color drew Tahneh's eyes as her blue had always drawn the eyes of her people. And now that he understood that her mocking had not been malicious, she could see that her blue was affecting him too. He could not help turning now and then to look at her. She chose one of these stolen glances to meet his eyes with a look of quiet invitation. In his eyes then, just for a moment, she saw hunger as intense as her own. She made herself look away and continue eating, but the food was abruptly tasteless.

She waited impatiently until the meal was over. Only then, after her people had gone home and his friends had been taken to their nearby guest apartment, did she permit her body to express the joy she felt in blinding luminescence. He was more hesitant. Perhaps he found her overwhelming—not that it mattered. She drew his hard flat young body to her and immediately gave the caress that directly preceded coupling. She lowered her head and gently bit the tender flesh of his throat.

Her suddenness seemed both to startle and to excite him, as she had intended. As she pulled him down to the pallet of furs before her fireplace, the uncertain iridescence of his coloring resolved itself and became, like her own, a blinding blue-white.

Later, it was as though they had been liaison mates for a full season. They lay content, close together, without the tension that had earlier separated them, and Tahneh asked the questions that had drawn her curiosity. Was Diut alone among his people, a Hao born of judge parents?

"I'm alone now," he told her quietly. "But my parents were both Hao. And I had a Hao uncle. My people have always produced an abundance of the blue."

"They must also lose it in abundance if only you are left."

"So," he agreed. "We had a war. My father was captured and … given poison. He died writhing in the dust instead of honorably in combat. That was before I was even old enough to know him. My mother and uncle fought to avenge him but finally, they were killed too."

“Who were your enemies?”

“Gahrkohn. People who live in one of the mountain valleys.”

The name meant nothing to Tahneh. “You grew up with no Hao teacher then.”

He moved slightly beside her. “I did, although it didn’t mean much to me until I was nearly ready to be acknowledged. Then I realized that on the day of my acknowledgement I would have a problem that my upbringing had not prepared me to handle.” He looked at her to make sure that she was listening. Seeing that she was, he went on.

“In the war, my people hurt the Gahrkohn, but not decisively. Their Hao was injured, but not killed, and though they lost more fighters than we did, they had many more to begin with. Their losses didn’t begin to bring them even with us. My people were afraid to continue fighting with no Hao to lead them. They agreed to a humiliating peace with the Gahrkohn and ignored most of the raids that the Gahrkohn made in violation of that peace. They would have accepted a tie with the Gahrkohn and become Gahrkohn themselves if there had not been so much hatred on both sides.”

He stopped, and Tahneh looked at him questioningly. “The Gahrkohn are still raiding?”

“So.”

“And now that you’re acknowledged, your people want you to renew the war against them.”

His body flared yellow. “They want it, yes. They expect it.”

“And you don’t want it.”

He let his coloring darken back to a cold metallic blue. “I want to stop the raiding. I will stop it. But to begin the war again would be utter foolishness. Even if we could win it wouldn’t gain us anything. We don’t want the Gahrkohn valley or their people—not even their children!” He made a sound of disgust. “But that’s meaningless; we couldn’t win. I’m not even sure we could survive this time. The Gahrkohn still outnumber us vastly. And they seem to be making none of the mistakes that they so obligingly made for my family.” He paused for a moment. “But in spite of all that, cousin, do

you know why my otherwise sensible people still believe we should fight?"

"I can guess," Tahneh said softly. "The Gahrkohn—they've lost their Hao?"

Diut yellowed once more, spoke harshly. "That is our whole advantage. *I* am our whole advantage! The Gahrkohn Hao died while I was growing up. Perhaps the injuries my people gave him helped him along, I don't know. Anyway, he left no successor. That alone is supposed to weaken the Gahrkohn enough for us to defeat them."

"Diut, that's no small thing. It may very well weaken them enough."

"So?" said Diut bitterly. "For the lack of only one fighter, they become vulnerable to a tribe half their size—a tribe led by a Hao whose only knowledge of war has come from reading and listening to others? My chief judge is more fit to lead in such a war than I am."

"But he didn't. He waited and gave the problem to you—because he's only a judge, and you're Hao."

Diut turned away from her abruptly, as though in disgust. "That's not enough!"

Tahneh said nothing, only placed a hand on his shoulder until he turned back.

"It's not enough," he repeated. "I have the coloring, yes, but judges raised me, trained me. Cousin, I'm nothing more now than a judge colored blue. And perhaps not even such a good judge, since my coloring made my guardians indulge me more than they should have."

"So," Tahneh said quietly. "I wondered if you knew that about yourself."

He grayed bleakly.

She sat up and looked down at him. "You're not ready to fight," she said. "Therefore letting your people push you into war would be foolish, as you say. You're acknowledged now. You can make an unpopular decision. You can say, 'No, we won't fight yet. I'll look at the situation and when I've examined it thoroughly, I'll decide whether or not we'll fight at all.'"

He watched her very closely. "Even though they've planned their vengeance for so long, depended on it, lived for it …?"

“Even so! You are their Hao. Give them new goals. Teach them that they are a new people now that they have acknowledged your authority.” Tahneh held up one hand before her, fingers stiffly together. “There is only *one* thing that the Hao does not control, and that is the succession. You should expect your people to accept your judgment on any other matter.”

“It’s a decision that I would have to take before my council of judges. They’ve been like parents to me since my mother and uncle were killed.”

“Perhaps. But once you’re acknowledged, you’re the parent.” She had been wondering about the way he was watching her and now, finally, she understood it. She whitened slightly. “I’m only saying things to you that you’ve already said to yourself.”

He hesitated, then let his own coloring whiten. “So.”

“Do you feel better, now that I’ve said them too?”

“I do, yes.” He touched her throat. “When I said them to myself, I felt like a child playing at being a ruler. I was even afraid at first that my council would treat me like a child and ignore me.” He flashed yellow. “Sometimes I’m still afraid.”

“You’ll lose the fear.”

He seemed to accept this, said, “I’ve never spoken this way to another person. Especially, I’ve never admitted to anyone else that I had doubts about the high value placed on the blue.”

She stroked his shoulder. “Your Hao relatives gave you something, then. These are things that should never be said to any but another Hao.”

He caught her arm and pulled her down beside him. “And you, cousin? Are there things you need to say?”

“Only …” She closed her eyes for a moment and put her forehead against his shoulder. “Only that I wish there were more of us.”

He could not know the desolation behind her words. He could not know that for a moment, her deliberately established dichotomy had slipped and she had been unable to continue to face him.

He gave her no words of comfort but he held her, stroking her, caressing her almost in the way of a parent

comforting a child. At first she tried to pull away, ashamed.

"Be still," he told her softly.

She paused, looking into his dimly glowing blue coloring. Then she lay still and let his hands first relax, then arouse her. Finally, she reached over, clasped his throat between thumb and fingers, and felt the steady even pulse of life there. He caught her hand and held it where it was as he leaned over and bit her gently near the base of her throat.

As they coupled, she found herself thinking for a moment of the ancient meaning of the bite and the hand-to-throat gestures. "I hold your life and do not take it." They had begun as gestures of trust rather than of affection, but their meaning had grown. Now, depending on the circumstances, a simple lifting of the head—as she had lifted hers to receive his bite—could mean trust, affection, challenge, or contempt. It was, Tahneh thought bitterly, the perfect gesture for a betrayal.

Diut awoke slowly—a luxury he had not permitted himself since leaving home—and knew at once that Tahneh was not beside him. That was why he had awakened. The sound of her breathing which had become part of the room for him had ceased just a moment before as she had left the apartment. He was not alarmed. It was his own custom to rise early, go out, and bathe in the river that ran below the cliff homes of his people. Tahneh's river, a narrow muddy stream, would not offer much in the way of bathing, but she might be attending to some other morning ritual. Or she might have some tribal business to take care of.

Diut rose, deciding to go outside where he could wander freely and watch the town come to life. He stood still for a moment, remembering the night and savoring the memory. He had had many liaisons already among his people, but Tahneh had been a different experience. Her aggressiveness had not only surprised him, but had angered him until he realized that she had the right. Who led in a liaison, in almost any activity, was determined by whose coloring had more blue. Fighter castes in particular could spot minute differences. But both Diut and Tahneh were completely blue. Hao blue. Among the Hao there were no

degrees of coloration. This did not mean that all Hao were equal, but simply that two Hao who wished to know which one was superior would have to fight to find out. As long as Diut and Tahneh had not fought, Tahneh had as much right to lead as Diut did. But there would be no fighting. Diut felt certain of that. He had accepted the woman too completely, accepted her without reservations as he had never done with another person. He had spoken his heresies openly for her judgment. All this because Tahneh was blue.

Perhaps there was something to the mysticism surrounding the blue. If it could move him so strongly, how much more must it sway others who were not blue themselves.

Diut glanced at one wall, knowing the location of the door from memory rather than from any obvious crack or other sign of its presence. The interior camouflage of the Rohkohn dwelling was the best that he had ever seen. It was as subtle as the exterior was obvious and it challenged him. He wondered if he could have found Tahneh's door in the dim general passageway—or whether he could even have found his way out of the apartment had he not memorized the position of the door.

From the floor plan that he remembered, he knew there was another exit—two more in fact. But one was an emergency exit, probably carefully set with traps for pursuers who did not know how to avoid them. This was an exit to be used in war when all else had already failed. Diut did not even try to find it. In fact, since he knew its general vicinity, he kept away from that part of the apartment. He went instead to the area of the other, safer exit. This was a room filled with Tahneh's maps and records. The maps in particular attracted him but he ignored them for the moment, studying the walls for some sign of the door he sought.

When he had been around the room once looking and failing to see, he stopped. He stood in the center of the room and asked himself where he would put a door if he was an artisan building the best possible concealed exit for his Hao. He found it then, partially covered with shelving and dropped slightly so that the first step out of it was a step down. That step was followed by a long steep stairway

up since this exit, unlike the main one, was available only to Tahneh. There was no passageway and the steps led directly to the surface.

Diut came up near the river. He had just enough time to notice that fact, to look down at the thin stream flowing sluggishly around large stones. Then, as his captors dropped their camouflage, Diut realized that he was, for a second time, surrounded by Rohkohn fighters.

The day before, when he had to be considered potentially hostile, the heavy guard that the Rohkohn had kept on him had been reasonable. Today, however, after he had spent a night in the arms of the Rohkohn Hao, such obvious heavy-handed methods were not only offensive, they were threatening. He knew that he had given Tahneh no reason to suspect him of being anything other than he actually was—therefore, Tahneh must have her own reasons for causing her people to threaten him.

But the fighters who encircled him this time formed only a small single ring, and they were mostly hunters. They were not nearly enough to hold him.

The instant the Rohkohn appeared, Diut spotted their yellowest hunter—the one he would have the least difficulty going past, or over. He had whirled to face that hunter when someone called out from the hill above.

"Stop, Tehkohn Hao. We have your friends."

Shouting alone would not nave diverted Diut's attention, but the content of this particular shout made him look up—just as it was intended to.

Atop the slight rise that was the roof of Tahneh's apartment stood Ehreh, the Rohkohn chief judge. Beside Ehreh, tied to upright stakes, were Jeh and Cheah. Diut saw all this and understood it in the instant before a tiny sound alerted him to the closing of the circle.

His coloring flared luminescent, a blue brilliant enough to hurt the eyes, and for an instant, even the hardened prepared fighters could not help responding, hesitating. To attack the blue …

Only the two judges of the circle managed to recover themselves quickly enough to try to stop Diut as he fled back to the door of Tahneh's apartment. Out of the corner of his eye he had seen what appeared to be every fighter the

Rohkohn town could muster fanning out thickly, closing toward him from the direction of the main entrances where they had either been waiting for him or been about to go in and get him.

Real fear touched him at last. He could be certain now of what the Rohkohn had in mind. He was to be stood before the tall lean Ehreh, and asked a question—this after he was captured and helpless. And on his answer would depend his own future and the lives of Jeh and Cheah. Either the judge and huntress would be set free to return to the Tehkohn to say that Diut had renounced them, his own people; or Jeh and Cheah must be killed to prevent them from returning to the Tehkohn with word that the Rohkohn had stolen and crippled the Tehkohn Hao.

Diut knew all this in a single instant of realization. He had no time to think. He could only react and retreat. The two judges came at him from opposite directions. The one on his right reached him first and struck out savagely, as though expecting to knock him unconscious at once.

Diut blocked the blows and in a continuing motion, jabbed hard into the man's larynx. The judge fell, his coloring the involuntary sun-yellow of pain and death.

Diut whirled instantly, raising his left arm to block another blow that he had sensed more than seen from the other judge. But the other had been too close. Diut was not quite fast enough. His arm took the full impact of a blow meant for his neck. The arm went numb and, for vital instants, hung useless at his side. Without pausing, he drove his right fist hard into the solar plexus of his new opponent, striking upward toward the heart. As the judge fell, Diut leaped back, taking the last step toward Tahneh's door.

A hunter leaped high at Diut, his body a green sun of luminescence. At the last instant, he seemed to twist in midair so that he landed just out of Diut's reach. Diut ignored him, pressing back hard against the door, flattening himself into it just in time to avoid the rear attack of a huntress with more serious intentions and less obvious ways. The whole circle was shrinking, closing on him.

Diut moved his hand quickly over the door behind him until he found the hand grip. Abruptly, he threw the door open into the face of yet another attacking hunter and dove

through.

He ran down the stairs to Tahneh's apartment, knowing that he might be running into worse trouble.

He had done a single unexpected thing—come through an exit that the Rohkohn had not expected him to know about, and that they had given only cursory coverage. That was why he was still alive. For he would surely force them to kill him rather than submit to the agony of crippling, the humiliation of captivity.

The apartment was still empty. He fled through it into what he hoped was an equally empty passageway. The passageway contained only three nonfighters hurrying toward the exit, probably to watch the capture. When they found themselves facing the Tehkohn Hao, uncaptured, desperate, they leaped terrified out of his path and faded instantly into the rough walls.

Diut ignored them, ran on silently down the passageway. It occurred to him a moment later that one of the things he could do to make the Rohkohn angry enough to kill him rather than capture him would be to kill a few nonfighters. The thought repelled him, however, and he knew he would not do such a thing if he had any other choice. Like all Kohn, he had spent his early years mostly in the care of nonfighters. He felt a strong emotional bond with the gentle defenseless people. Besides that, he was no longer thinking of dying. His memory of the floor plan of this ancient dwelling might very well give him life.

Apart from the three nonfighters, the passageway ahead seemed deserted. Faint sounds behind him told him he was pursued by a large number of people, and he realized from his own knowledge that other Rohkohn must be moving above ground either to block the exits or to come through them and cut him off. His only hope seemed to lie in running, dodging, hiding, fighting until he could find the unused portions of the dwelling where there were passageways and exits that the Rohkohn might not be able to cover.

Diut followed the main passageway for several minutes, knowing that it was the most dangerous way for him, but fearful of leaving it because it was also the most certain way. In his mind, he carried the full floor plan of the

city as it had been at the height of the empire. But his own people lived in imperial ruins, and he knew that they had made changes that would have made an imperial floor plan of their dwelling dangerously inaccurate in spots. From what he had seen of the Rohkohn, the tribe was smaller than his own, but still large enough to make changes in the part of the desert dwelling that they occupied.

An animal snarl and a cry of pain just around a bend in the passageway stopped Diut's headlong run. He did not need to see what was ahead to know that he had now reached the heart of the dwelling. Here lived the nonfighters and the young children, surrounded by a protective ring of fighters' apartments. Diut was surprised that he had been allowed to reach so easily what should have been a jealously guarded area. But he had been fortunate enough to catch his pursuers unaware, and, too, the defense arrangement was not expected to keep out a Hao—especially not a Hao who knew how to avoid the false turns.

Diut stood still for a moment and listened to the squalling ahead of him. He could no longer hear his pursuers, though he had no doubt that he would be hearing them again soon. There should be a fork in the tunnel just ahead. One passageway was only part of the inner ring that connected the nonfighter apartments. The second passageway, however, should lead to a second double ring of fighter and nonfighter apartments, and to a third, a fourth, and a fifth. The ancient ruin had grown by duplicating itself, becoming a city of five parts. But Diut doubted that the small tribe of Rohkohn occupied even all of the one double ring that they had taken over. If he could get to one of the unoccupied rings and find his way out …

He hesitated, knowing that the second passageway went once more through the outer ring of this circle and, doubtless, through a line of Rohkohn fighters who would be more adequately prepared this time. But it was his only real chance.

He flattened himself against the wall, blending instantly and invisibly into it, then reblending as he moved so that only someone who happened to be staring intently as he moved along would notice him. And by the sounds

ahead, he doubted that anyone would be paying attention to the walls.

He edged around the bend until he was able to see what he had expected—two deep-green hunter children rolling on the floor biting, kicking, punching, clawing each other savagely. A few other children of fighter and nonfighter castes stood in a circle around the combatants, watching silently. A pair of adult nonfighters came out of a nearby apartment and crossed the passageway to another apartment, hardly giving the hunter children a glance.

Diut watched the fighting children, seeing that both were tired and hurt. He knew that the fight would soon end. If it ended with him where he was, though, he might have to reveal himself to escape. No one in this section would try to stop him if he revealed himself, but the nonfighters would immediately send messengers to his pursuers. As things stood, the Rohkohn fighters behind him could not be certain whether he was still moving or whether he had camouflaged himself in the hope that his superior ability would prevent his being seen. Or he might have turned down a side passageway or found his way into another apartment. They could not run headlong as he had. They had to check all the possibilities as they followed. He had that much of an advantage and he did not intend to give it away.

As he continued to move, the topmost child of the fighting pair managed to get a hold on the throat of his opponent with his strong young teeth. The bottom child instantly turned the faded yellow of submission, and the fight was over.

The winner stood up, his body luminescent green with victory. The loser took longer to get up. He maintained his submissive yellow and met the winner's eyes gravely when that child looked at him. But when the winner advanced on him once more, the watching fighter children, passive until then, abruptly formed a line separating the combatants and facing the winner. The bluest child in the line, a boy who would someday be a judge, spoke authoritatively. Diut's familiarity with the situation and with the imperial root language permitted him to understand most of what was said and to fill in what he did not understand.

“There is nothing more to decide, Choh. You are stronger.”

“And more blue!” said the winner hotly.

The young judge-to-be turned, looked questioningly at the loser.

The loser seemed to meet his defender’s gaze with difficulty, but he was proud. He did not break down; he did not turn his face away. But he did not say the necessary words either.

The protective line of children melted away as quickly as it had formed, and Choh advanced again as though he had not been interrupted. The loser stood his ground, his desperation showing only in his eyes. He made no move to defend himself as Choh approached. Perhaps Choh was impressed by his courage, as he hesitated instead of striking at once.

“What can you win?” Choh asked. “Are you ashamed to admit the truth?”

The loser seemed to come to the necessary decision slowly. His eyes became less desperate, more resigned. When he first opened his mouth to speak, he had no voice and had to try again. The second time he succeeded.

“I’m ashamed,” he said. “You will be too, someday.” Then, very softly, “You’re more blue.”

The excitement was over, and Diut was not yet near the tunnel fork that he had been approaching. He stopped and waited, completely undetectable now that he was no longer moving. He knew that the passageway where it widened for the fork was probably a regular gathering place for the children, but now that the fight was over perhaps they would leave. If they did not, if he let them keep him where he was long enough for his pursuers to reach this part of the dwelling, it would not be necessary for him to be visible to be found. The Rohkohn fighters would have torches by now for testing the walls. A single torch drawn along the wall until it reached him would burn him and caused a reflexive change in his coloring.

Some of the children were leaving. The two who had fought and three others went away to various apartments along the passageway. The others, however, after discussing the fight until it became boring, organized one of the hiding

games that served the double purpose of keeping them occupied and forcing them to improve their camouflage skills. To make matters worse, Diut caught the sound of many feet moving slowly down the passageway that he had intended to enter. These were sounds that he had expected to hear from behind him, but apparently his enemies had seen their own weakness—their inability to cover the unoccupied parts of the dwelling—and they had anticipated him. A moment later, he heard the Rohkohn behind him too and knew that his concealment had become useless. Immediately, he ceased his camouflage.

Two of the children who happened to be facing in his direction when he became visible flared yellow and fled. Others looked to see what had frightened them, then scattered to vanish inexpertly into the nearby walls. In full view of all of them, Diut walked to the apartment that he had seen Choh enter. As that apartment door had opened, Diut, directly across from it, had seen several nonfighters and younger children inside. It looked, Diut thought bitterly, like a good place to make a last stand.

The adults inside the apartment were artisans, specifically weavers. The apartment was only a single room containing several large looms. It was clearly a factory rather than a living area. Apparently the Rohkohn made greater use of cloth than did Diut's Tehkohn, who preferred animal skins almost exclusively for their mats and blankets.

Within the room some children sat on the floor and played a game with small sticky and smooth stones, while others clustered around the sides of one of the looms listening to a male artisan who was telling them a story. One child—Diut saw at once that it was Choh—stood alone beside the loom of a quietly beautiful artisan female, no doubt telling her of his recent victory. The woman was probably one of his guardians.

Diut's size and coloring attracted everyone's attention at once. Weavers ceased their monotonous work and the children on the floor stopped their game. But this time, in the closed room, no one tried to run. The children waited to see what the adults would do and the adults were apparently not willing to abandon the children as they would have to do if they hoped to escape.

After a moment of silence, Choh's foster-mother—who happened, with her bright yellow-green coloring, to be the bluest adult present—stood up and faced Diut.

"You are the Tehkohn Hao?" She spoke the imperial language flawlessly in spite of fear that she did not even try to hide.

"So," answered Diut.

She looked around the room at the children and other nonfighters, then looked back to Diut. "There is another way out of this room, Tehkohn Hao."

"I'm aware of it," Diut said regretfully. The camouflage here was not as good as in Tahneh's apartment, and he had just spotted it. But he had noticed something else too. "It leads to a passageway now being searched." At this depth, no single apartment had a passageway that lead directly to the surface.

The woman spoke more softly. "If there must be fighting here then, will you let the youngest children be taken out?"

"No," Diut said.

The woman accepted this as though she had expected it. Her eyes half closed as though in pain, she said, "We're at your command, Tehkohn Hao."

Diut sighed. "Get the children off the floor. Keep them well back against the looms with you and they may not be hurt."

While other weavers moved to get the young children, the woman continued to face Diut. "We will keep them behind us," she said quietly.

Diut accepted this in silence. Choh's hunter parents had placed him well. For a nonfighter, the woman had rare courage.

There was a wait that probably seemed longer than it was for the two search parties to come together outside the door of the weavers' room. Soon, Diut knew, he would have every fighter in the dwelling outside that door. But within the room, he had twelve nonfighter adults and fifteen children. That fact alone might keep the Rohkohn outside for quite a while. It took time to decide to sacrifice nonfighters and children, and there was no doubt that the searchers understood the implied threat of Diut's fleeing

into a room full of defenseless people. Diut had only the ignorance of the Rohkohn in his favor now. They did not know whether the mountain Hao was savage enough to begin slaughtering his prisoners if he were attacked. They did not know whether the first fighter through the door would be met by the hurled body of a dead child. Or most of them did not know. One of them, however, despite their short acquaintance, probably knew Diut dangerously well.

The door opened silently, slowly, and the Rohkohn Hao stepped through it with no attempt at camouflage.

Tahneh understood the situation at a glance—that glance being all the looking around she allowed herself in the presence of a desperate Hao. Diut had harmed no one, had permitted the nonfighters to shield the children.

The sight comforted her somehow, reassured her that she was not alone in her dangerous foolish sentimentality. The fact that he had taken hostages in his position showed that he had decided to die. The only thing hostages could buy him was death, but in order to buy him even that, some of them had to die. She should have found some of them dead when she came in—her coming, slow as it had been, should have triggered a few deaths. A corpse should have been flung at her as she entered. Diut should have done everything he could to make her and her fighters believe they needed vengeance more than they needed a successor Hao. But Diut had not been brutal enough. And now, it was too late. She kept her eyes on him but spoke to her nonfighters.

"Take the children and leave quickly."

The nonfighters obeyed immediately, Choh's foster mother leading the way. Diut moved as though to a group that was warily passing him. When he moved, Tahneh danced several quick steps toward him. He turned back to her barely in time to stop her rush.

She let him back away, now that he understood how well she would use his slightest inattention. He made no further effort to stop the nonfighters. They filed out slowly and when they were gone, Ehreh's voice came through the doorway behind her.

"They're all safe, Rohkohn Hao."

“Close the door,” Tahneh ordered.

There was a period of silence during which Tahneh saw that she had surprised Diut and guessed that she had surprised Ehreh as well. She had come to take part in the capture on hearing that Diut held nonfighters and children hostage. Her only thought then had been to free the hostages safely. The Tehkohn Hao concerned her deeply and what was about to happen to him sickened her, but her own people came first. She could not have stood by and watched them destroyed by a foreigner, even though that foreigner was blue. Now that the hostages were safe, however, she found herself emotionally and physically unable to stand aside and permit her fighters to take Diut. She knew that she was only putting off the inevitable. Diut had to be taken; she could give him only minutes. But at least she could see that he got those.

Ehreh spoke very carefully. “We are ready for him, Rohkohn Hao. He cannot escape us again.”

“So,” agreed Tahneh. She stepped aside, away from the doorway so that Ehreh was not directly behind her. She saw Diut grow tense and knew he thought she was giving him to her fighters. But out of the corner of her eye, she also saw Ehreh become tense. The chief judge knew her far better than did Diut. He could read her tone of voice even when her coloring remained neutral. He could understand when it was best to be silent and obey. Tahneh spoke again very softly. “Close the door, Ehreh.”

Without another word, Ehreh stepped back out of the apartment and closed the door.

When he was gone, Tahneh gave her full attention to Diut. He had lifted his head slightly, much as he had lifted it the night before, but this time the gesture was open challenge.

Tahneh ignored the challenge, sadly quoted her own words of the night before. “‘There is only one thing that the Hao does not control, and that is the succession.’ ” She grayed with helpless regret. “I don’t want this, little cousin.”

“Don’t you? I’m comforted, Tahneh!” He spat the words at her.

“Your own people will commit this same act when you don’t return to them,” she said. “No tribe would deliberately

remain without a Hao … and I can't give my people the successor that they must have."

"But they have you now! Later your judges might produce …"

"A Hao from the air? How often do such things happen, Diut?"

"They happen!"

"They are considered miraculous. Do you think my people would let you go and gamble their future on a hoped-for miracle?"

He did not answer. He turned his face away from her in a way that was calculated to be insulting. Again she ignored the insult. She spoke gently.

"You're the miracle, cousin, coming to us in this time of trouble when the people have finally admitted to themselves that I can't give them a successor; when our river is drying up, dying …"

"And what can I do about your river," he broke in angrily. "Do you think that by burning my legs and keeping me here, you'll cause the river to fill again?"

"The people believe that the blue will save them," she said simply. But she found herself again searching for some way to save him. She had already admitted that what had to be had to be, that there was nothing she could do. Now, though, facing him, she could no longer accept that decision.

She let her attention stray from him as she thought, and with no warning at all, he sprang at her. She managed to dodge backward at the last possible instant and immediately she was all fighter again, watching, ready. Already, she knew that he was not as fast as he should have been. She had been completely unprepared. She should not have had time to dodge.

"What purpose can this serve?" she asked him. "Even if you kill me, you can't escape my people."

"Revenge, perhaps." He faced her, his body seemingly relaxed. "If your people have their way, a lust for revenge is all I'll have left."

"It hasn't happened yet," she said almost angrily. She rubbed her forehead. "Diut, if we're superior people at all, we should be able to find a way to stop it from happening."

She had the beginnings of an idea, radical, but perhaps workable. She needed time to think though, and time to talk to him. But he was no longer in a mood to talk, or to listen.

Abruptly he sprang forward again, aiming a jab at her throat that could have been lethal. She blocked the blow and moved quickly away from him without retaliating. He had given up. He was ready to kill. He was ready to die.

They stood apart, watching each other, and it occurred to her that Diut fought as though he were fighting a judge or a hunter. No doubt it had been years since he had faced anyone who could match him in size, speed and strength. Now he fought as though he expected his opponent to be physically inferior, as though he expected one blow to be enough. Of course, one blow from him could very easily be enough for a judge or a hunter, but the Hao were harder to kill.

His shortcoming had made Tahneh fairly sure that she could kill him, however. In fact, she was afraid he was going to make it difficult for her not to. But she knew that he would not listen to her until he had seen that he had no choice, that she was the better fighter. Grimly, she accepted his challenge.

Tahneh's coloring became the clearest of blues, luminescent, intense, the essence of all that was compelling and confusing about the Hao coloring. Diut stared at her, feeling himself captured, drawn, momentarily as confused as any non-Hao might have been. He wanted to look away, to back away. He wanted to go to her, to touch her … With an effort, he threw off the influence. He wanted to kill her.

He did nothing at all. He stood where he was, realizing that she could have struck him down while her coloring held him. Why hadn't she? Did she still think she could talk him into submission? Did she think she could use the bond of their mutual coloring to sway him?

Deliberately, he let his own body flare into a harsher, less pleasing luminescence. In the midst of the flare, he shot toward her, striking again at her throat, hoping that his glare had blinded her.

Tahneh bent her body sharply to one side without moving her feet, so that his hand jabbed empty air. But her

hand slashed stunningly into the side of his neck.

He stumbled away, glaring at her in pain and rage. Blue or not, she was not far from the time when her coloring would begin to mottle with yellow age spots. She had no right to be so fast.

He realized that she could have hit him a little differently and killed him if that had been her purpose. Or she could have knocked him unconscious or crippled him. These last thoughts were chilling. Somehow, he had to prevent her from crippling him or knocking him out and giving him to her people. Only by presenting a solid threat to her could he cause her to stop her training-room defenses and fight to kill.

He moved warily around her, watching her turn to keep him in view. “It’s good to see that you’ve done something with your years,” he said angrily. “Since you failed to produce a child for your people, you must have been left with much time to improve your fighting ability.”

“So,” she agreed. And if the cruelty of the words touched her, she did not show it. She stood still now, relaxed, waiting. Then she stopped waiting.

She advanced in quick, light steps, coming so suddenly that he was startled at first and backed away. She followed more slowly. He struck at her face. As she blocked, he kicked.

But she danced away from him with the seeming ease of a judge out-speeding a hunter. For a brief instant as she moved by him, she touched his throat lightly, much as she had touched it the night before. Then, he had taken her touch as a gesture of affection. Now, it could be only a sign of derision, contempt. It said, “See how easily I could kill you?” It said, “See what a poor fighter you are compared to me?”

It was all her speed, her flashing here and there to avoid him. He had not yet landed a real blow—and now this humiliation!

He kicked again furiously, spurred by his shame. She leaped away and he went after her.

He hit her. His anger had given him speed. She was off balance. He hit her again, and she fell. Somehow, she caught hold of him, half dragged him to the floor with her.

He tore loose, went for her throat.

She twisted away, pulled her legs up tight against her chest. She shot her feet forward with the force of her body's weight.

But for once, she was too slow. He dodged, came to his feet in the same motion. She started up, saw him, swiveled on one hip, kicking. She caught him once solidly in the shin, and he was thrown off balance.

Instantly, she was back on her feet facing him. "You could have put your foot on my throat just now," she said.

He said nothing. They circled each other warily.

"I could have killed you; you could have killed me."

Still he did not speak. Was it true, he wondered. Had he deliberately passed a chance to kill her? He knew without thinking any farther that he had, and his anger turned inward against himself. He hit her a glancing blow to the jaw and she flashed yellow with pain and anger.

She struck back using her speed. Twice she hit him solid blows to the face. She kicked into the same shin that she had kicked before.

He fell, his coloring blue-green as the yellow that he could not hold back announced his pain to her. His leg felt as though she had broken it. He had to move it to know that it was not broken.

"Let this be the end of it, Diut," she said sharply. "Hear what I have to say to you."

She was too confident, standing too near him. Hardly thinking about what he did, he shot out a hand and seized one of her feet, jerking her off balance before she could kick. She fell, twisted, then was abruptly still as she felt his fingers at her throat.

She waited, her eyes glittering into his. "Well, cousin?"

He tightened his hold, willing her to make some defensive move. "We aren't children," he said harshly. "I challenged. You accepted."

"Then kill me. And become accustomed to that position." He was now kneeling over her.

He gave her a long look of disgust—though he was more disgusted with himself. He knew he was not going to kill her. Worse, she knew it. He didn't understand how he could trust her again, give up his advantage when he knew

what was in store for him.

"What is your idea, Tahneh?" he asked tiredly. He had no faith in her ideas, whatever they might be. She had said herself, twice, that the Hao did not control the succession. She had been right.

She reached up with no special speed or strength and took his hands from her throat. She sat up and seemed to forget the fight.

"We'll talk first," she said. She took a few deep breaths, then asked, "How many Tehkohn do you have at your dwelling?"

"Almost five thousand. But why …?"

"So many in spite of your war?"

"We were more. The Gahrkohn are over ten thousand."

She looked concerned. "How have you lived this long with such an imbalance?"

"Our mountains are a wall against our enemies. The Gahrkohn raid our lower game traps, but they don't raid our dwelling."

"So?" she said thoughtfully. Then, "We are only fifteen hundred." She darkened her blue fatalistically. "Desert tribes are small, and we're small even for a desert tribe. Perhaps now, though, that's for the best. Do you have room in your mountains for fifteen hundred more people, Tehkohn Hao?"

By then, Diut had seen it coming, but somehow it still shocked him. Her use of his title made her request formal and serious. "You'd consider moving your people so far from their traditional homeland?"

"I won't consider it. I'll do it if you tell me they'll be welcome. The drought will drive us from here soon anyway."

Diut thought of his own people—tried to imagine their reaction if he told them he wanted them to move to the coastal desert. "Are you sure you can convince them?"

She flared luminescent. "You are even younger than I thought, cousin. My people will do what I tell them. Exactly what I tell them."

Diut considered that, decided that it was probably true. His people obeyed him even though they had just recently ceased to consider him a child. But he did not think they

would leave their mountains for him. Would they be willing, then, to take in a whole tribe of foreigners simply because he ordered them to?

He visualized himself before his council of judges giving the order, then drew back from the thought. He realized that his upbringing was hampering him again. In a childish way, he was still in awe of his council of judges. But Tahneh was right. He did have to learn to expect, to demand obedience from them. It was true that they might disapprove of his decision out of habit. They had had things their way through the years of his childhood. But now they had acknowledged him, and he would have to teach them to obey. He spoke to Tahneh.

"There's room. Will your people return with me when I leave?"

She whitened. "That would be best. There might be a part for your friends in this too. But first I must know something more about them."

"Jeh and Cheah …?" Guiltily, Diut realized that he had hardly thought of his companions since he left them bound on the hill. "Are they all right?" he asked.

"Yes. They're under guard where you left them. Has their marriage made them pariahs among your people, Diut?"

"No. Most people accept them and respect them. The rest fear them and leave them alone."

"And they still rank high in their castes?"

"As high as their coloring permits—and they both have excellent coloring. They do their work well. Cheah's size may prevent her from becoming a chief, but I expect Jeh to become chief judge in a few years."

"I thought you might have plans for them," she said watching him. "Did you order them to come with you on this trip?"

"No. They insisted on coming. I should have ordered them to stay behind."

"So." She changed the subject abruptly. "You have my word, Diut, that no further action will be taken against you by me or my people. Do I have your word that my people will be accepted in your mountain dwelling—that they will become Tehkohn?"

“You have my word,” he said. And he felt as though the weight that he had left home to avoid had not only caught up with him, but had doubled before settling itself solidly on his shoulders. But he could not afford more uncertainty. His decision was made and now, however difficult it proved to be, he had to stand by it. Fifteen hundred Rohkohn would give up their homes and trek across desert and mountains to become Tehkohn. And this would happen because he had spoken a few words. He tried to balance his emotions, smooth away the yellow awe he felt, strangely combined with the luminescent blue of power. He could have made a brilliant green iridescence, but he controlled himself.

Tahneh watched Diut closely, seeing the uncertainty that he probably thought he concealed. He did not inspire confidence. She sighed inwardly, glad that her plans did not depend on any particular ability of his. He would learn. And with her in his mountains with him, his pride would drive him to learn quickly.

She got up and went to the door. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him get up too, his body tense. They had to trust each other personally before they could trust each other in any broader way. She had to be able to turn her back to him without fear of being attacked. He had to be willing to let her call in some of her people without fearing that they were being called to subdue him.

She opened the door and called in Ehreh and the chiefs of the three other castes. They trailed in, puzzled, and stood well away from Diut. When they were in, Tahneh spoke to another judge waiting with the crowd of fighters outside the door.

“Go to the surface and get the Tehkohn huntress and judge. Take enough fighters with you to ensure your being able to bring them to me unhurt.”

The judge, a young female, flashed white assent and Tahneh closed the door. She turned to face her four caste chiefs, knowing already the outcry they would make as soon as she said what she had to say to them.

“The Tehkohn Hao and I have made our peace,” she said. “This is what we are going to do.” She told them quietly, her voice even, her coloring muted as though in

shadow. Muting made her blue less intimidating and freed people to speak their minds more easily.

When she finished speaking, the two nonfighters, a male farmer and a female artisan, were a shade yellower than they had been when she began. Ehreh and the chief hunter controlled their coloring but not their voices.

"You can't do this, Rohkohn Hao," Ehreh said at once.

Tahneh ignored him. She answered questions and paid no attention to outbursts. The caste chiefs were the eyes, the ears, and the mouths of their respective castes. They brought Tahneh the views and the large problems of their castes and took back her decisions and pronouncements. Of course, any person could speak with Tahneh regardless of caste, but most people preferred to go through their caste chiefs. The blue made them secure, but when it came too close, it also frightened them.

There was no similarity of coloring among the chiefs, thus there could be no challenging, no fighting no matter what offenses were committed. Tahneh had to keep order in a way that was not necessary in the more homogeneous council of judges. Her one rule was that an insult to another chief was an insult to herself. Her fairness in punishing offenders, fighter and nonfighter alike, enforced unusual equality in a society where normally, no person was equal. Now Tahneh waited while her chiefs, under this protection, asked their questions.

"This is our home, Rohkohn Hao," the artisan said. "While there's still water, we should stay. The river might begin to fill again the day after we leave."

"And it might not fill again at all," said Tahneh. "We all know of dry places that were once riverbeds."

"But our river isn't dry. No one is dying of thirst."

"No one is dying of thirst *yet*," said Tahneh. "But how long will it be before we are? Or will we die of hunger?" She looked at the farmer. She had spoken with him privately several times on this matter and knew exactly how bad the crop situation was.

"We're harvesting now," the farmer said bitterly. "What there is to harvest. What the sun didn't kill, and what we had water enough to irrigate." He let his bright green fade to yellow. "There isn't enough to get us through the

next year."

Tahneh let them all absorb that, then said, "Much of the game has migrated too."

Everyone looked at the chief hunter, who was also beginning to yellow.

"Fish has always been a delicacy with us," Tahneh went on. "There has never been enough of it."

"There could be more," said Ehreh, "if both hunters and judges concentrate on it. And perhaps our methods of fishing need improvement."

"The methods work," defended the chief hunter. "It is not our fault that the sea here is less productive than the land. Send your judges. They'll learn."

"There is no fault," said Tahneh. "We have a drought and we have to move. That's all."

"But we're desert people," said the chief hunter in a different tone. "Since the empire broke apart, our ancestors have lived on the desert. We should find another home here, where we belong."

All three of the others flashed white agreement at once.

"This is our *home*," asserted the artisan again. "It may be that we must leave this dwelling for a while, but why should we leave the desert? What do we know about living in the mountains?"

"What we don't know, we'll learn," said Tahneh. "We have an offer of sanctuary in the mountains. Which desert tribe would make us such an offer?" The drought was extensive and her chiefs knew it. No desert tribe would be likely to welcome refugees now.

"We're not hungry yet," said the hunter. "We're not weak. We don't have to go begging for what we need. We can take it."

"So." Tahneh looked at Ehreh. This was something that she had discussed with him and all but decided to do—until now. "If we had to take from others to survive, we would do it. But now it's not necessary, and the fighters we would have lost need not die."

The farmer spoke up. "But with two Hao, we wouldn't lose many. Our luck would change."

Again there was general agreement.

Tahneh had been waiting for this. It was an expression

of the kind of belief, the kind of faith that made the people consider the Hao so essential. The Hao were supposed to possess some special ability to bring good to their people. It was not just that they tried to give good government, promote unity. Their mere presence was supposed to assure the people of good luck, fulfillment of their needs. Why else would a captive Hao, a bitter cripple, be better than no Hao at all?

"Our luck *has* changed," said Tahneh smoothly. "Because of the Tehkohn Hao, we'll have a new home with game, water, fertile land. You'll have two Hao working together for you willingly. And the toll that a captive Hao would have taken on his captors needs never be paid. There will be no more fighting, no more deaths."

"No more deaths until we reach Diut's mountains," said Ehreh. "Until his people can overwhelm us."

Tahneh had to look at him to understand that although he faced her, he was actually speaking to Diut, testing the young Hao as well as expressing his doubts.

Diut spoke up at once. "I have already given my word that my people will accept you peacefully." He came over to stand beside Tahneh and face the chief judge. "You'll take your places among the Tehkohn and rise as high as your ability and your coloring will take you. *Or you will remain as low as your judgment can keep you.*" Diut had not missed Ehreh's too-familiar use of his name rather than his title. And Ehreh could not have missed the warning in Diut's response. Tahneh watched silently, curious, as Ehreh was curious to see how Diut handled people who were not blue —how far they could push him. She would prevent fighting, if necessary, though she did not think it would be necessary. Diut knew that he was on trial before her chiefs. He might even realize that Ehreh was testing him. At any rate, he would not be eager to kill the Rohkohn chief judge if such a thing could be avoided. Ehreh would advance as far as Diut permitted, then with equal ease, retreat back as far as Diut pressed him. It was no dishonor for a non-Hao to give ground before a Hao. And Ehreh would find out what he wanted to know.

Ehreh looked at Diut with respect but without fear. "Tehkohn Hao," he said quietly. "I don't question your

word. I only wonder … if you can be certain that your people will be as willing as you are to keep the promise that you've made."

Tahneh watched Ehreh now, remembering how little confidence Diut had inspired in her earlier. It was important that her chiefs not feel what she felt. Diut had to be able to display Hao superiority whether he believed in it or not. He spoke mildly.

"I'm an acknowledged Hao, chief judge. Why do you question my ability to govern?"

Just right, Tahneh thought. Retreat was the only escape from such a question.

"I … spoke too quickly, Tehkohn Hao." Ehreh's voice was lower. "I did question and I had no right. I meant no offense."

"A chief judge should be less careless," said Diut. "Speak carelessly again and I'll accept your words as challenge."

Ehreh flashed white assent. Then, as his coloring darkened back to normal, the door opened and several judges carried Jeh and Cheah into the room. The two were still securely tied. Their judge captors placed them on the floor before Tahneh and left silently. When they were gone, Tahneh spoke again to her chiefs.

"You've all heard my decision. We're going. You will inform the people."

The four accepted this, understood that the meeting was over. When Tahneh, by her silence and muted coloring, had encouraged questions and argument, the chiefs had questioned and argued. Now, however, her tone told them that she had made her decision and their protests ended. Three of them filed out at once. Even Ehreh stopped only long enough to ask if he could speak with her later. At her "Yes," he turned and followed the others.

As they left, Tahneh went to one of the looms and from beside it took a weaver's knife. Handling the knife, she remembered that nonfighters had occasionally been known to use such tools on each other in anger. Being nonfighters, they had no standards of combat, no moral obligation to restrict themselves to only the body's natural weapons. Thus it would have been possible for a nonfighter to try to use

such a tool on Diut. It would have been an act of suicidal desperation, but it would have been possible. Tahneh was glad it had not happened. She would have found it much harder to bargain with a Hao who had just killed one of the weakest of her tribe. She handed the knife to Diut.

He took it wordlessly and cut his huntress and judge free of their bonds.

The two got up stiffly, rubbing arms and legs. They said nothing, apparently waiting for Diut to tell them what had happened. He told them briefly and as he spoke, Tahneh watched their reactions with special interest. Jeh and Cheah were to play an important part in her plans. It would be dangerous if they were actively hostile to the idea of a tie between the two tribes. But there was no sign of hostility in their manner.

"And you have already given your word in this, Tehkohn Hao?" asked Jeh when Diut was finished.

"So," Diut answered.

Jeh seemed to think about it. "There's room," he said. "There's food and water." He glanced at Tahneh. "And there are plenty of contentious fighters jealous of the places that they've already made for themselves."

"One fighter may challenge another," said Tahneh.

But apparently she had missed something in the young judge's seemingly innocent words—something Diut caught. Diut spoke up quickly.

"That's so. But the three of us, Jeh, will hold no grudge for what has happened to us here." He looked from Jeh to Cheah, and Tahneh saw by the looks that they gave back that he had guessed right. The two had been roughly handled, unfairly subdued by several Rohkohn, then humiliatingly displayed. Apparently they felt that they had debts to pay. Diut spoke again firmly.

"It should be clear to both of you that I'm buying our lives with this promise of sanctuary for the Rohkohn. And the Rohkohn Hao is buying assured survival for her people."

The two flashed white assent—less grudgingly than Tahneh would have expected. The huntress spoke for the first time.

"Is there a part for us in this, Tehkohn Hao—something you want us to do?"

“There is something,” said Tahneh before Diut could answer. She had decided that her plan would work. These two could play the role she had intended for them. “You and Jeh will prepare the way for my people. You will return to your mountains at once and let the Tehkohn know that we’re coming, that they should prepare to meet us in peace.”

“We are to return home without the Tehkohn Hao?” Cheah asked doubtfully.

“The Tehkohn Hao will stay and guide us to our new home,” answered Tahneh.

Tahneh glanced at Diut and saw that a small amount of yellow had crept into his coloring. Like his huntress and judge, Diut was just learning this part of her plan, just coming to understand that it was his own presence as a hostage among the Rohkohn that would ensure Rohkohn safe passage. Tahneh was worried about her people’s first contact with the Tehkohn. She believed Diut meant his promise, but like Ehreh she worried about the immediate reaction of his people. They had been without a ruling Hao for too long. They might not be as quick to obey as they should be.

Now, Tahneh thought, Diut could either pretend to have been aware of her plan all along and confirm her orders to Jeh and Cheah, or he could contradict her, argue with her in front of them, and inevitably lose the argument. For the moment, Tahneh was in the stronger position, and she meant to use that position to ensure the safety of her people. He spoke to her softly.

“It seems, cousin, that you and your chief judge share similar doubts.”

She turned her head to look at him, but said nothing. The yellow, she noticed, was gone from his coloring.

“In the end, you and your people take the greater risk,” he said.

“So.”

“In the face of that, I’ll accept the most immediate risk.” He spoke to Jeh and Cheah. “You’ll go as the Rohkohn Hao has said. I’ll follow later with the Rohkohn.”

The two flashed white.

Tahneh suppressed an impulse to let her own body

whiten with pleasure. He had handled himself well with Ehreh, and well again now. In his youth, he carried his uncertainty closer to the surface than she carried hers. But already he was learning.

Tahneh went to the door again and when she opened it this time, she saw that her chiefs had already cleared away the crowd. In its place waited only the judges who had brought her Jeh and Cheah. She called in two of these and spoke to them.

"The Tehkohn huntress and judge will spend today and tomorrow with us as guests, free of any restraint. Tomorrow night, they will be given whatever provisions they ask for and allowed to return to the mountains."

Tahneh waited until her judges flashed white, then she looked back at Jeh and Cheah. "Go with them now, back to your apartment. They'll see that you're not bothered."

Jeh and Cheah left silently. When they were gone, Tahneh sat down wearily on one of the weavers' mats. "Well, little cousin, it begins."

To her surprise, Diut whitened with apparent amusement. "It sounded more like it was almost over."

She gave him a sidelong glance. "Do you know how little time it will take Ehreh to call a meeting of the council of judges, and how long it will take the council to argue our tie over and over pointlessly until they finally decide to do as I've ordered? And I must be present. The game must be played correctly. Then there will be the preparations, the actual moving … We're not a nomadic people, Diut. It will be difficult."

Diut sat down beside her. "I'll do what I can to help," he said, "if, from now on, you'll give me some forewarning of your plans before you act on them."

She looked at him, then sighed. "I've been a ruling Hao for a long time, cousin. Habit is strong."

"I've just become a ruling Hao," he countered. "But I am the Tehkohn Hao, and I do intend to rule."

"You are *a* Tehkohn Hao. Now there are two of us."

He flashed white. "Two Hao, Tahneh. I won't be like your council of judges, merely deciding to do as you say."

She stroked his shoulder, smoothing the fur down his arm. He amused her, but she felt a seriousness too. She

spoke quietly. “I don’t owe you this warning, cousin, but I’ll give it to you anyway. Unless you’re careful, you’ll become exactly like my council of judges. You dislike responsibility. I’m accustomed to it. Think how easy it would be for you to become lax, satisfied, willing to enjoy the prestige of your coloring while doing nothing to earn it.”

“That won’t happen, Tahneh.”

“But,” she whitened slightly, “I’ve given you back your life. That’s enough. What you do with it is up to you.”

As much warningly as affectionately, she reached over and caressed his throat.

Childfinder

Standardization of psionic ability through large segments of the population must have given different peoples wonderful opportunities to understand each other. Such abilities could bridge age-old divisions of race, religion, nationality, etc. as could nothing else. Psi could have put the human race on the road to utopia.

Away from the organization. As far away as I could get. 855 South Madison. An unfurnished three-room house for $60 a month. Rain through the roof in the winter, insects through the walls in the summer. Most of the electrical outlets not working. Most of the faucets working all the time whether they were turned off or not. Tenant pays utilities. My house. And there were seven more just like it. All set in a straggly row and called a court.

Not that I minded the place really. I'd lived in worse. And I killed every damn rat and roach on the premises before I moved in. Besides, there was this kid next door. Young, educable, with the beginnings of a talent she was presently using for shoplifting. A pre-telepath.

Saturday.

She came over at 10 a.m., banging on the door as though she intended to come through it whether I opened it or not. Considering her background and the condition of the door, she might have.

I let her in. Ten years old, dirty, filthy even at this hour of the morning. Which meant she had probably gone to bed that way. Her mother worked at night and her older sister knew better than to try to make her do anything she didn't want to do. Like bathe. Most of her hair was pulled back in

a linty pony tail. The kind that advertised the fact that she had just started "combing" it herself.

"Come on in. What do you want?" I knew what she wanted. I'd been waiting for her all morning. But it made her suspicious when I was too nice or too understanding.

"Here's your book." She wasn't comfortable handing it to me.

"What happened to the cover?"

"Larry played with it and tore it off."

"Valerie, what'd you let a two-year-old play with a book for?"

"Mama said share it with him."

I took the book from her, keeping my expression just short of disgust. People don't like you breaking up their things. She knew it and she didn't expect me to be happy. Actually I didn't care. There was only one thing I cared about.

"Did you read it?"

"Yeah."

"Like it?"

"Yeah."

"What did you like about it?"

She shrugged. "I don't know." Beginning of battle. You drag words out of her, one by painful one. You prove to her that she can do a lot more thinking than she's used to … if she wants to. Then you make her want to. And all the time you push her, guide her thinking just a little. Partly to get her used to mental communication—like letting a baby hear speech so it can learn to talk. And partly to shock her into thinking along new and not always pleasant lines. That last is ugly. Not something I like to do to kids. The adults I do it to usually can't be reached any other way. Most of the time they're not salvageable anyway. All the kids like Valerie have is ten years or so of failure conditioning. Not quite enough to be fatal.

Valerie said, "I liked the parts where Harriet helped those slaves to get away."

"She could have been killed every time she helped them."

"Yeah."

"Why do you think she kept doing it?"

Again the bored shrug. “I don’t know. Wanted them to get free, I guess.”

Off-the-top-of-her-head stuff. She had liked the book all right, at least while she was reading it. It was a juvenile biography of Harriet Tubman, well written, fast moving, and exciting. There were a lot of reasons for Valerie to get more than a couple of evenings of entertainment out of it. Reasons beyond the ones usually given for making a black kid read that kind of book. Right now, though, her mind had wandered outside, where the rest of the court kids were screaming and chasing each other up and down the driveway.

I hit her with a scene from the book. Herself in Harriet’s place. Seven or eight people following her north. Night. North star. White people nearby. Danger. Close call. Fear. One of her followers wanting to turn back, and another, and another. Fear like a barrier you could reach out and touch. Gun in her hand, telling them they would go on with her or be shot

Push.

Reading it and living it are two different things. Valerie got the whole scene in a few seconds like a really vivid dream. Not the kind of dream someone her age ought to be having, but she was going to have to grow up pretty fast.

She shook herself and muttered something like, “Long-haired motherfucker!” It was one of the kinder names that people in our court called each other from time to time. But at that moment Valerie was applying it to the rest of Harriet’s would-be deserters.

She looked at me, frowning. “They always got halfway up north and then somebody would get scared and want to go back. How come they were so scared to just go ahead and be free?”

Breakthrough. The kids outside were forgotten for the moment. She had asked a question she wanted the answer to.

I worked with Valerie until her brother—an older one, not Larry—banged on the door and yelled, “Valerie, Mama say come do these dishes.”

She left, taking another book with her, a step closer to being ready. I became aware of somebody else as Valerie

left.

A woman coming down the driveway to my house. She spoke to Valerie in the kind of first-grade language that the ten-year-old had come to know and dislike years ago.

"My, that's a big book you have there. Are you going to read all that?"

Valerie muttered something that might have been either "yes" or "no," leaped the distance between her porch and mine and disappeared into her house. She had left my door open, and the woman walked in like she owned the place. Organization woman. White, of course. White people came to the court to turn off the utilities, evict tenants, sell overpriced junk and take care of other equally savory kinds of business. This would be one of those other kinds. For once, I was glad of Valerie's youth and ignorance. She didn't know anything the organization could lift out of her thoughts and use against me.

I said, "Eve, if you don't know how to talk to kids why don't you just pass by without saying anything?"

"I was only trying to be pleasant to her because she's one of yours." She sat down uninvited and smoothed first her dress, then her hair. Her hair was long and when she was nervous she liked to fool with it. Now she was starting to twist a piece of it around her fingers.

"Did she think you were pleasant?"

Eve changed the subject. "We've missed you. We want you to come to a meeting today … if you have time."

"I don't." A lot of things I wouldn't like could happen to me at one of their meetings.

"Barbara, come. Really, if you don't there's going to be trouble."

"There'll be trouble no matter what. But I didn't know it was so close. Thanks for the warning." So they were finally getting worried enough about what I was doing to think about forcing me back to the fold.

She looked around at my so-called house and listened to the kids screaming outside. "What is it you're so willing to fight for? What do you have here that you couldn't have more of with us?"

"Valeries."

"I've told you before, Barbara, bring the children. We

want them too."

"Do you? Are you sure? These are the same kids you wouldn't even consider before I left. You took one look into them and you couldn't get out fast enough."

"All right, we were wrong. You're the childfinder and we should have listened. Come back now and we will listen."

"I don't need you any more." The way they hadn't needed me before I started finding pre-psi kids. I know a lot about them, about the way they feel. The kind of things normal people can only guess about each other.

Silence for a moment. As silent as my court gets, anyway.

"So the others are right. You're forming an opposing organization."

"We won't oppose you unless we have to."

"A segregated black-only group … Don't you see, you're setting yourself up for the same troubles that plague the normals."

"No. Until you get another childfinder, I don't think they'll be quite the same. More like reversed." I almost said, "How does it feel to be on the downside for a change." Almost. And to one of the new people—the next step for mankind.

Honest to God, that's the way they talked when I was with them. They had everything they needed then. Somebody to pull them all together—all the ones who had managed to mature on their own. The ones who had been solitary misfits, human trash, until they got together. I was one of them. I know just how low they were before someone with the talent to reach out and call them together matured. That led to the organization and the organization led me to find out that I hadn't been as mature as I thought. Led me to discover that I was the other thing they needed. Somebody who could recognize normal-appearing kids who had psi potential before they got too old and the potential in them died from lack of use. Originally the organization was a group of exceptions. Most pre-psi kids don't mature without help. That's why the organization had stayed the same size since the day I left it.

Eve was saying, "Sooner or later we're bound to get

another childfinder."

That was true. Except that I was likely to see their childfinder before they did. I'd seen two white potential ones so far. I hate to hurt kids. I mean it. My specialty is helping them. But I crippled those two for good. The best they can hope for now—if they knew enough to hope—is to be normal with traces of psionic ability.

"Barbara." There was a change in Eve's voice that made me look at her. "I didn't want to say this, but … well, you can't watch *all* the kids you've collected *all* the time. Especially since you're still out looking for new ones. We would hate to do anything, but …"

They wouldn't hate it. And they wouldn't be careful. Where I'd cripple kids painlessly, they would kill them. After all that build-up about the organization wanting them.

"Don't come after my kids, Eve."

"Do you think I'd want to? Do you think it was my idea? You're the one who won't listen to reason. …"

"Don't come after my kids! You'll lose a lot more than you bargain for if you do. You'd be surprised how fast some of them are growing up, and they know a lot more about you than you know about them."

She got mad then and tried one of her organization tricks. Swiping at me. Trying to grab what I knew out of my thoughts before I could realize what she was doing and stop her. But who's likely to know more about that kind of thing? Someone who spends months teaching it to kids, or someone who's had to be polite most of the time and pretend it doesn't exist? She didn't get a thing. Not even the satisfaction of taking me by surprise. So she left. Just like that. She got up and walked out.

I didn't reach after her until she was outside in the driveway. I meant to catch her just as she started to give way to her anger and let her guard down a little. I meant to show her how that little trick worked!

I never got to do it.

There were three organization men waiting in her car. She stood in the driveway and called them to her. Then she started back toward my house with them surrounding her. Her protection.

Three. And they weren't teachers. They were the

world's first psionic brawlers. They fought among themselves mostly. Sparring, jockeying for position in the organization, fooling around. It kept them alert and in shape.

I never even thought of running. They were set to have too much fun as it was. Something like this had been bound to happen sooner or later anyway. I had known that for a long time.

The four of them came in and faced me silently. They didn't have to say anything.

I shrugged. "Do you mind if I get my things?"

They took long enough answering to have been doing some silent arguing about it. I wouldn't know for sure because I had shut myself up as tight as I could in my own head. Anything I let slip now, they would grab. I'd been bragging about how much my kids knew about the organization. Now, one slip and the organization would know all about my kids.

Eve. "I'll bring what you need, Barbara." She evidently spoke for all of them.

As they herded me toward the door, one of the men said, "How long did you think we'd let you get away with this shit anyway?"

I was making things too easy for him. He wanted to make me mad enough to do something stupid. Like dropping my guard.

I never had time to get mad. Just as the man finished speaking, one of the other two yelled. It would have taken me a little longer to realize what was going on without that yell. Not that the realization helped me.

The men and Eve fell to the floor unconscious before they could even spot their attacker. It happened so fast they appeared to fall in unison.

I stared down at them for a moment muttering, "Oh God!" Then I started to feel the anger that the organization man's question had not had time to bring. I had to force myself calm before I could come out of my mental shell.

The first thing I got when I did come out was an identity. Not a "my name is." Just a mental impression that I recognized like the sound of a familiar voice. I reached out.

Jordan.

Hey. His thought was easy, like his voice. *Why don't you let somebody know you in trouble? If we hadn't felt you closing yourself off a minute ago they would have had you and gone before we could do anything.*

Confusion. I didn't know what to feel. I was let down rather than relieved. And the fear that I had managed to conceal from my organization captors now had to be concealed from Jordan, because he wouldn't understand it any more than they would have. The only safe emotion was anger, and he didn't deserve that. He'd only been trying to help.

Jordan again. *You better get out of there now. The organization must know what we did to their pigs. They'll be sending twenty people after you instead of four!*

No doubt. He was seventeen. One of the first kids I'd found after leaving the organization. Not too long ago a college student from Kenya had told him he looked like a Watusi man. His head was still pretty big over that.

Jordan, let them come to. I sent the thought, knowing beforehand what his answer would be. He replied true to form.

What? Shit, they almost got you once! What you want to …?

Looks to me like she wanted them to get her. Another identity. Jessie Mae. One of my developing childfinders and a lot better telepath than she ought to have been at fifteen.

It had to happen sooner or later. I managed to make it no more than an unemotional statement of fact.

Like hell it did! Both of them and a lot of others besides. All the older ones were in on this. And in a way, that was good. Later nobody would be able to blame anybody else for whatever happened.

They know me, Jordan. I can't hide from them. They can find me wherever I am and they can use me to find you.

Jordan. *You don't have to hide from them. There's enough of us to stop them.*

Softly. *Man, I know there is. But it's not time yet. Because all you can do is stop them. How long do you think you can hold them? Or do you figure they'll all be as easy as these four?*

Silence. Belligerent mutterings. Little "we can take

them right now" fantasies beginning to grow in several minds at once.

I shoved all the disgust I could into my next thought. *I thought I had managed to teach one or two of you something.* If you really put your heart in it, you can make a single mildly worded thought like that carry more slap than all the profanity you could use.

They all shut up. A couple of them jerked away from me in surprise as though they were dodging an expected blow.

I continued only a little more gently. *I thought I had taught you to look out for yourselves. To do what you had to to keep yourselves alive and together and hidden until you're too strong for the organization to touch.*

I paused for a moment. *You know you're in danger of being found every time you're with me. We're just lucky they took as long as they did to decide that we're something to worry about. Lucky they gave you time to …*

Time to get ready. Time to learn to make it on their own. Yeah. Start out strong like you're going to hit them if they don't behave. And then wind up carrying on worse than they are. Shit.

I was tired. Almost too tired to be afraid any more. *Jordan bring them to for me, please. And Jessie Mae, as soon as I leave, come get Valerie. She doesn't know anything, but I'm afraid of what they might do to her to find that out for sure.*

Jordan answered first. *Barbara, I'd sooner kill them now than let them get up and take you.*

Then Jessie Mae. *We need you! What happens to us if they take you?*

You … survive, honey. You don't need me. You already know about all I can teach you.

Abruptly Jessie Mae was projecting so intensely I could almost see her—tall, stronger than a girl was supposed to be, her face perpetually set in a defiant scowl. She hadn't cried since she was seven years old. *You're going to let them kill you. You're going to let them take you away and kill you!*

No I'm not.

You are! I'm not so dumb I can't see that!

You are dumb! Or you could see that they want me alive and well so I can work for them. They think. I can string them

along as long as I have to. I could feel her disbelief like a rock in my mind. *Anyway … anyway, Jessie Mae, I swear to God I'm not going to let them kill me.*

She wavered slightly, a little less sure of herself. *Barbara …*

Do what I tell you, Jessie Mae, Jordan. Just do it. I closed them out to give them time to consider and to hide my half-lie before they could see it for what it was.

I wasn't exactly going to let the organization kill me. There was too much chance that they might learn something from me as I died. They would definitely try. And no amount of "stringing them along" would work for long. Especially after this little show of strength the kids had put on. So in a couple of minutes, as soon as Jordan let Eve and her friends regain consciousness, I was going to forget everything I knew about pre-psi kids and finding them. Thinking about it, thinking about forgetting, about erasing the thing that had become as important to me as breathing, brought my fear back full force. It was like saying I was going to kill myself. I almost envied those white kids I'd crippled. They never knew what they were losing.

But afraid or not, I was going to do it. I had started something that I wasn't going to let the organization stop. Partly because my kids deserved a chance. And partly because they were going to settle a lot of scores for me and a few million other people … someday.

On the floor one of the men groaned and opened his eyes.

> *Historians believe that an atmosphere of tolerance and peace would be a natural outgrowth of a psionic society.*
>
> *Records of the fate of the psis are sketchy. Legend tells us that they were all victims of a disease to which they were particularly vulnerable. Whatever the cause, we may be sure that this is one civilization that was destroyed by purely external forces.*
>
> Psi: History of a Vanished People

———————

"Childfinder" appears in this volume through the courtesy of Harlan Ellison®. This story was written by Octavia Estelle Butler especially for her close friend, the editor of The Last Dangerous Visions*, and appears here for the first time.*

Childfinder

Afterword

"Childfinder" is the product of Harlan Ellison week at the Clarion Science Fiction Writers' Workshop. It is also the product of my generally pessimistic outlook. After a few years of watching the human species make things unnecessarily difficult for itself I have little hope that it will do anything more than survive and continue its cycle of errors. An incident from my own childhood illustrates my point.

When I was little my mother worked and I was often left with one of my aunts or my grandmother. Sometimes when this happened, I would disagree with whichever of my cousins I found myself with. If the disagreement was noisy enough, whoever was in charge of us would come to the door and warn, "Now you all get along out there! No fighting!" We would stop obediently and wait until she went away before we resumed the fight. Aunt or grandmother, she always seemed surprised when one of us came in bloody.

After such an experience, I am surprised to find myself writing the same kind of warning in "Childfinder." "Get along out there! No fighting!" But in at least one way I'm different from my aunts and my grandmother. I know no one's listening.

Afterword

Octavia E. Butler (1947–2006)—winner of a MacArthur Fellowship "genius grant," a PEN Lifetime Achievement Award, and several Hugo and Nebula Awards—was my client, and she was a pack rat. In her will, she named me literary executor of her estate and left her papers to the Huntington Library outside of Pasadena. There were so many boxes of correspondence, manuscripts, and notes that it was soon clear to everyone that the archiving alone was going to take years.

When Octavia's cousin Ernestine Walker asked me to come out to California in October of 2012 to help identify some letters and photos that had ended up in the family archives, we also planned to visit Sue Hodson, curator of literary manuscripts, who was still hard at work supervising the archiving of the windfall.

I knew that somewhere existed a finished story Octavia had sold to Harlan Ellison in the 1970s for his much-anticipated *Last Dangerous Visions* anthology, which was never published. I had always wanted to find this story, and Ernestine, along with many in the science fiction community, had urged me to make this a priority.

After a long and disappointing search through the stacks, we went back to the office of Natalie Russell, the wonderful assistant curator, where she was still finishing her catalog of Butler's works. There were desks covered with organized mountains of papers and files that had yet to be read through, and there was absolutely no reason to feel hopeful. But then my eye fell on a box marked *Contracts*, and while I admit that not everyone might have considered this a breathtaking discovery, as an agent, I couldn't resist. I started rifling through them and tripping down memory lane ("I remember this deal—whatever happened to that editor?" and "Oh my god, how did I ever agree to those mass market royalties?!") but finally, there it was—the official signed agreement for "Childfinder." Armed now

with title and date, we quickly found the original, typewritten manuscript.

Natalie, who was still knee deep in her work, needed time to make copies of all this (the woman is, after all, a librarian) and find all the other relevant, supporting documents that might ever have existed. She promised to send everything to my office in New York.

Back at my hotel, still kind of dazed by our success, I finally focused on the calls and texts on my phone from family, friends, and Delta Airlines. Hurricane Sandy's rising waters were devastating the East Coast. Flights cancelled, mother panicking in Connecticut, husband and daughter hunkering down … and of course CNN was in full 24/7 disaster mode. Suddenly there were a few other things to think about.

I finally got home a week later. When the package from the Huntington arrived sometime after that, I found not just "Childfinder," but also *another* story—truly unexpected—"A Necessary Being," with notes from the author indicating that it had been submitted a very few times in the early seventies, then apparently shelved.

Now, after much discussion and thought, the time feels right to make these early stories available, not just to the graduate students and professors who have access to a great research library, but also to her many fans and readers.

Octavia's family thought it was important that these stories be published and available to anyone who might be interested in the early work of a true genius (and believer in global warming)—Octavia E. Butler.

Merrilee Heifetz
Writers House
April 29, 2014

A Biography of Octavia E. Butler

Octavia E. Butler (1947–2006) was a bestselling and award-winning author, considered one of the best science fiction writers of her generation. She received both the Hugo and Nebula awards, and in 1995 became the first author of science fiction to receive a MacArthur Fellowship. She was also awarded the prestigious PEN Lifetime Achievement Award in 2000.

Butler's father died when she was very young; her mother raised her in Pasadena, California. Shy, tall, and dyslexic, Butler immersed herself in reading whatever books she could find. She began writing at twelve, when a B movie called *Devil Girl from Mars* inspired her to try writing a better science-fiction story.

She took writing classes throughout college, attending the Clarion Writers Workshop and, in 1969, the Open Door Workshop of the Screenwriters' Guild of America, a program designed to mentor Latino and African American writers. There she met renowned science fiction author Harlan Ellison, who adopted Butler as his protégé.

In 1974 she began writing *Patternmaster* (1976), set in a future world where a network of all-powerful telepaths dominate humanity. Praised both for its imaginative vision and for Butler's powerful prose, the novel spawned four prequels, beginning with *Mind of My Mind* (1977) and finishing with *Clay's Ark* (1984).

Although the Patternist series established Butler among the science fiction elite, *Kindred* (1979) brought her mainstream success. In that novel, a young black woman travels back in time to the antebellum South, where she is called on to protect the life of a white, slaveholding ancestor. *Kindred*'s protagonist stood out in a genre that, at the time, was widely dominated by white men.

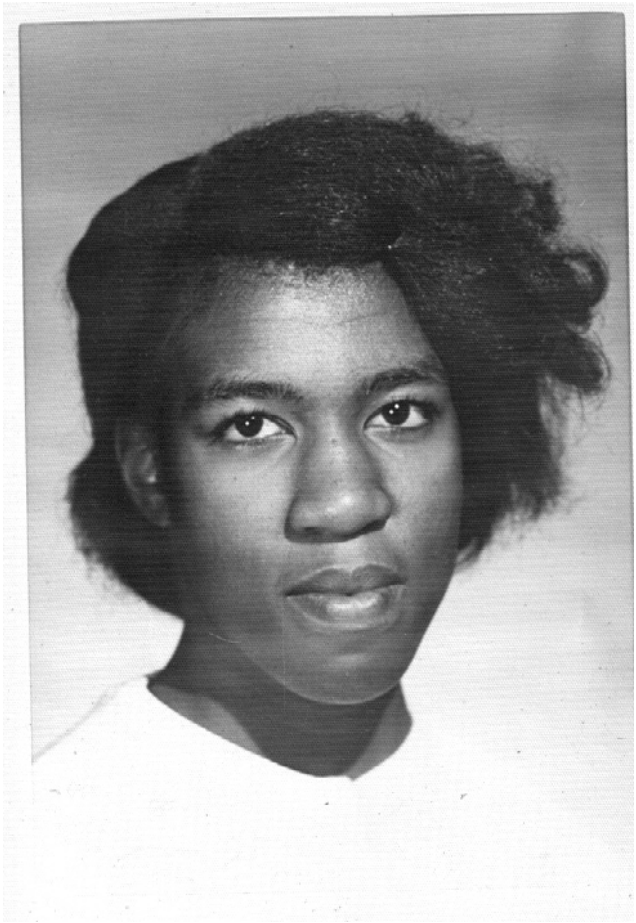
In 1985, Butler won Nebula and Hugo awards for the

novella *Bloodchild*, which was reprinted in 1995 as *Bloodchild and Other Stories*. *Dawn* (1987) began the Xenogenesis trilogy, about a race of aliens who visit earth to save humanity from itself. *Adulthood Rites* (1988) and *Imago* (1989) continue the story, following the life of the first child born with a mixture of alien and human DNA.

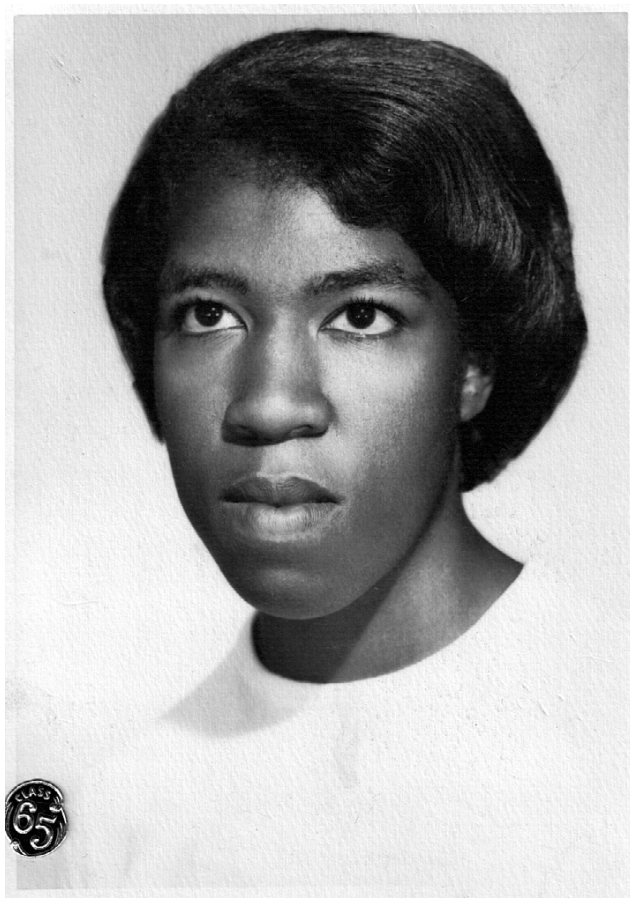
Fledgling (2005), which combines vampire and science fiction narratives, was Butler's final novel. "She wasn't writing romance or feel-good novels," mystery author Walter Mosley said. "She was writing very difficult, brilliant work." Her books have been translated into several languages, and continue to appear widely in school and college literature curricula.

Butler died at home in Washington in 2006.

Butler, age three, sits with her mother for a photo in Los Angeles in 1951.



Butler at age thirteen. She began writing the year before when a science fiction film—the cult favorite *Devil Girl from Mars*—inspired her to create something of her own.



Butler's 1965 senior class photo from John Muir High School in Pasadena, California.

Butler reading a book in 1975, the year before she published *Patternmaster*.

Butler on a book tour for *Parable of the Sower* in New York City in 1993.

Butler addresses the audience at Marygrove College, Detroit, during the Contemporary American Author Lecture Series in 1994.

Butler won both Nebula and Hugo awards for her contributions to the science fiction genre. (Photo courtesy of Anna Fedor.)

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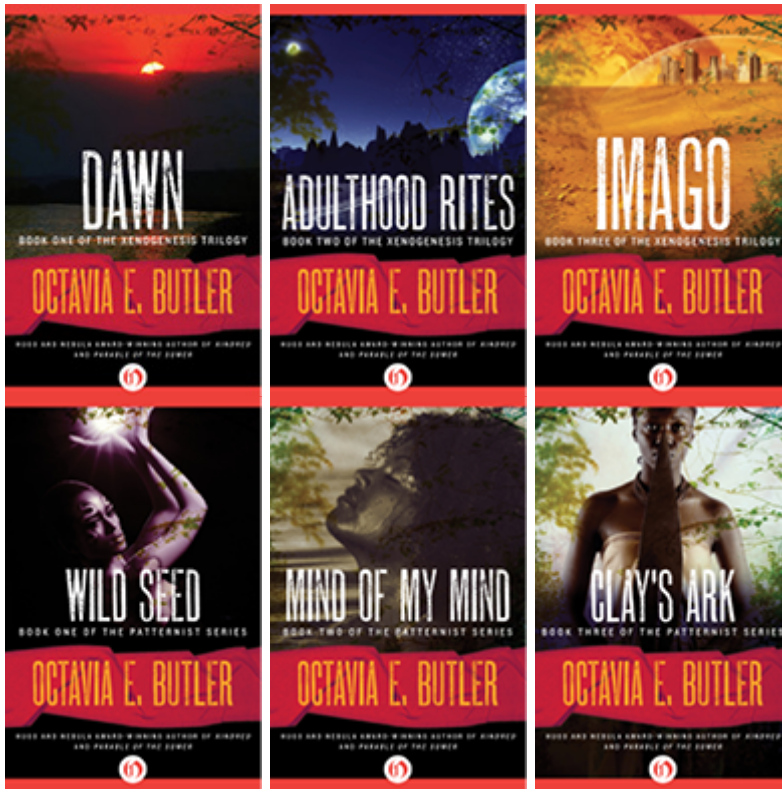

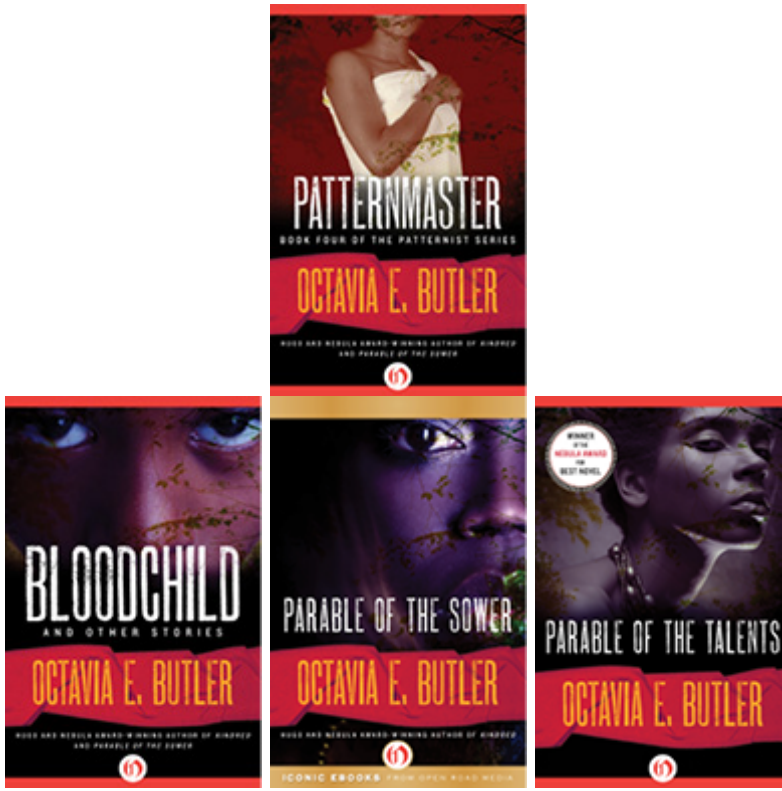

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